



Tip Sheet: Interacting with Shelter Clients

An important role of all shelter workers is to interact with clients. This is important because it makes each client feel cared for and helps improve morale in the shelter. It also helps build situational awareness for shelter management so we can improve the shelter experience and better serve needs. Having an outgoing personality and starting conversations is natural for some people, but others are more reserved and initiating conversations may feel less natural. This sheet presents some tips for talking with clients.

As you move through the shelter to carry out other tasks, greet people with a smile, wave or say “hello,” even if you don’t recognize them from earlier interactions. Remember, sometimes there are no words needed, and just sitting with a person without talking provides needed support in the moment.

Ask Some Simple Questions:

- Ask about shelter conditions: “Are you warm enough?”, “How are the food portions?” or “How’s the food?”
- Ask about them: “How are you doing?” or “Do you have what you need?”
- Ask about their children: “How are your children doing?” or “Do your children need anything?”
- Ask about their networks: “Have you been able to connect with family members, friends or co-workers?”
- Ask basic questions about recovery: “Have you talked with the caseworkers yet?”, “Do you know when you’ll be allowed to go back to look at your home?”

Have Longer Conversations:

- Approach slowly within client’s line of vision.
- Before speaking, try to picture yourself in their situation.
- Try to gain eye-level contact; stand or sit next to them.
- Make eye contact unless this seems to make the client uncomfortable.
- Introduce yourself; ask their name.
- Ask both open-ended and close-ended questions and talk about the disaster, the shelter, or anything else they want to discuss.
- Actively listen and demonstrate your care.
- Allow the client to tell their story.
- Some clients may be more comfortable while actively engaged (walking with you, eating a meal together, or assisting in a shelter task).
- Group conversations may take the pressure off, so sit and chat with a group of people.

Information Sharing

Anytime you learn useful information about shelter services or needs, tell the Shelter Shift Supervisor. If you learn information about personal needs or a client's transition out of the shelter, tell the Shelter Shift Supervisor, Shelter Resident Transition Supervisor, or relevant Disaster Health Services / Disaster Mental Health worker.

Building Trust & Establishing Relationships

