



## Considerations for Site Selection and Center Design When Providing Supervised Visitation & Safe Exchange Services to Survivors of Intimate Partner Abuse

When providing supervised visitation and safe exchange services to survivors of intimate partner abuse and their children, safeguards must be in place to ensure safety. Survivors of intimate partner abuse should have all safeguards regardless of their custodial status.

The first essential consideration is understanding the type of services offered and ensuring space needs are met.

**Supervised Visitation:** Provides an environment for staff to engage with families and supervise all aspects of the contact between a parent and their children. Ideally, families would have a space that would be dedicated for their family to use while at the center but also have access to shared space such as an activity room, kitchen, or play area.

**Safe Supervised Exchanges:** Provides a safe location and trained staff members to transfer children from one parent to the other safely. Dedicated space supports transitioning children from one parent to the other, away from any physical, visual, or auditory connection between the parents. The exchange transition space should also support staff being able to check in with children comfortably away from each parent before each exchange.

Supervised visitation program grantees, funded by the United States Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), must consider the safety of both child and adult survivors as their highest priority. To be eligible to support supervised visitation with OVW funding, all grantees must adhere to the The Guiding Principles for Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange, U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.\* The Guiding Principles were developed as a guidepost for developing and administering supervised visitation programs that provide services to adult survivors of intimate partner violence and their children.

The OVW Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Guiding Principles are as follows:

- Equal regard for the safety of children and adult survivors
- Valuing multiculturalism and diversity
- Incorporating an understanding of domestic violence
- Respectful and fair interaction
- Community collaboration
- Advocacy for children and adult victims

To adhere to the OVW Guiding Principles and to follow promising practices in the field of supervised visitation, the following minimum considerations should be considered when designing a supervised visitation space.

Ensuring parents have **physical, visual, and auditory separation** is essential. To accomplish this, there should be **distinct and separate areas** that allow for separate approaches to the building, parking areas, entrances, and waiting areas. Staff must be able to monitor each area easily, and all areas must be separated physically, visually, and audibly.

\*The Guiding Principles were developed by a national steering committee for the Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program, U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, 2007.

**Windows.** Supervised visitation is a service where a “room with a view” is neither desirable nor safe. The center space should not be located where it can be seen and monitored from outside the building. It is also important that the parent in the visitation or waiting space cannot monitor or see the outside of the building (e.g., watching who drops off or picks up the child from inside the space or monitoring what takes place in the visitation space from outside the space). Who can see in and out of each window is very important to consider, as well as whether the time of day and level of light (e.g., dark outside/light inside or vice versa) makes a difference. Window tinting or temporary window film may be helpful to block visibility and ensure visible separation.

Installing internal one-way mirrored windows may also be a helpful addition for a variety of purposes, such as:

- providing additional observation by multiple staff members without the family feeling overwhelmed
- for children who have had a prolonged absence from a parent that might find it helpful to be able to “just see” their parent before coming face-to-face with them
- for staff training purposes
- for families that are transitioning out of supervised visitation.

**Location of interior doors.** Program staff will want to pay attention to what can be seen and heard when doors are open and closed. For example, a waiting area should not be placed in front of the door leading to the visitation space or the other waiting area. A parent in the visitation space should not be able to see or hear the other parent in a waiting space and vice versa. It is also important to consider how additional staff can easily and unobtrusively act as additional backup support during visits by ensuring the visitation space isn't in a remote location of the building.

**Waiting rooms.** A place for each parent to wait before, during, and after services, as well as a private space where staff can have conversations with each parent and child away from other waiting parents, is important. Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs must also consider what personal belongings are allowed into the visitation area. It may be helpful to provide a locker or secure cabinet in or near the waiting area for visiting parents to keep their belongings during the visit.

**Traffic flow of the building.** The visitation space should not be in a remote location of the building, but it should also not be in a traffic flow area. It should not be in an area that staff or participants of other programs will have access to or use as a route to walk from one area of the building to another.

**Acoustics.** The design of the space and the materials used will impact the space's acoustics. It is important to remember that staff will need to hear and see everything that takes place during services. Staff should ensure they can easily monitor without being required to sit beside the family, even if whispering occurs. Multiple families and children playing, laughing, crying, yelling, and talking in the same space can be very loud; consider how sound will carry and how this will affect the staff's ability to hear conversations. It is also important to consider what can be heard from each space of the center (e.g., Can someone in the waiting room hear what is happening in the visitation space or the staff office?). A parent waiting in one space should not be able to listen to the other parent. Determine how sound echoes and carries in each space of the center. Make a note of what other elements will make noise in each area of the space (e.g., Is the building in the path of regular air traffic or next to a railway line? Is there a loud air conditioning unit, furnace, or mechanical room that will create extra noise?).

**Storage space** for program supplies, participant files, office supplies, toys and activities, food, cleaning supplies, holiday decorations, and computer and video camera equipment all need enough space and an appropriate “home.” Determine where these items could be located, who will have access, who should have access and the ease of access to each of these items.

**Restrooms** should be gender-neutral, child-friendly, and accessible to the non-custodial parent, the custodial parent, and the children before, during, and after services. Programs will want to ensure that staff can monitor the approach and departure to and from the restrooms. When designing the space, remember that most families have multiple children. Center staff will need to determine how to monitor children using the restroom during services and still be able to monitor the other children who are not using the restroom (It is not ideal to “parade” all of the children to the restroom during a supervised visitation). Staff should also plan how smaller children who need assistance in the restroom can be helped by either a staff person or how a staff person can easily and fully monitor a parent providing assistance to their child. Designing the restroom space so smaller children can be self-sufficient is also helpful. Make the location and height placement of the toilet paper, hand sanitizer, hand towel dispensers, light switches, sink, and toilets approachable to a young person. It is also helpful to adjust the sensitivity of motion-activated lights to ensure they turn on when a young person enters and don’t switch off too quickly if a child remains still while using the restroom.

**Diaper-changing areas** should be considered. Supervised visitation and exchange center programs will want to determine how to accommodate a diaper changing area that will allow the staff to monitor the diaper changing but not have the area visible to other families while in use. Staff should also plan how a custodial parent or a staff member would be able to change a diaper, particularly in child sexual abuse cases where the visiting parent cannot change the diaper or observe the diaper being changed.

**Workspace for staff.** Supervised visitation programs should ensure easy and accessible staff interaction, consultation, and backup support. Staff office space should not be in a remote location of the building.

**Security mechanisms.** Items to consider in supervised visitation and safe exchange security plans are:

- lighting inside and outside
- intercom systems
- cameras
- audio/video capability in the waiting and visitation rooms
- emergency backup staff notification systems
- 911 panic buttons
- door buzzers
- metal detectors
- automatic closing and locking doors
- passcode security door locks
- security or law enforcement officers on-site or a responsive off-site law enforcement response.

Each of these items should be carefully considered and match the philosophy of the organization, the cultural implications of the families served, the case issues of the families being served, and the type of service being provided (e.g., supervised one-on-one visits, group visits, supervised exchanges, therapeutic visitation). As a whole, many of these security items have advantages and disadvantages, and each should match individual program needs and the overall philosophy of the services provided.

**Video cameras and recording devices.** It is also important to determine if and how video cameras/recording devices will be used, the purpose of the camera, the recording systems, and any potential unintended consequences of using such a system.

If video cameras or recording devices will be used, it is important to explore the following:

- Who will have access to the recordings? How might participants use the recordings? How could the recordings be used in court proceedings? What resources will be required to use the recordings both internally and externally? What safeguards must be put in place to avoid unintended consequences?
- Which technological options will fit the program's needs? For example, programs will need to determine the following: digital vs. analog recording, motion-activated recording vs. continuous recording or live viewing only, time/date stamp recording, the time stamp to save for later review features, auto-delete, auto-save, size of recording storage, multiple camera viewing capacity, camera rotation, audio vs. a non-audio recording.
- Program staff will also need to determine how the cameras will be used to monitor activity and who will monitor the activity. It does not do any good and could be problematic if a video surveillance system is in place but is not monitored.
- The quality of your video. For example, do you want to identify the features of a person from the video? Similarly, should videos show if a vehicle is in the parking lot, or should staff be able to determine the make and model and read the car's license plate in the parking lot?
- Consider the capacity, number, and placement of your equipment. For example, the number of cameras needed, the lighting needed to support good use of the video feed, the placement of monitors, the number of monitors needed, the size of monitors, the number of video cameras that can be monitored at one time, the size of the picture and ability to zoom are all important factors that will need to be determined.
- Account for potential program growth. It may be far more economical to anticipate the need for additional cameras or monitoring stations before the system is installed. Purchasing a system that can be enhanced or expanded in the future may be more beneficial in the long term.
- Determine how long recordings will be maintained. Purging recordings on a pre-identified schedule as a standard business practice will help ensure that information is not available for external use indefinitely.

**Staffing.** Part of the security design is ensuring that the center’s staffing level is adequate to provide services safely. It is essential that a site does not have staff work alone in the facility. Ideally, it is also helpful to include a staff member who is a backup staff to those facilitating the visitations and exchanges. This staff member, akin to a “floater” position, must be vigilant and aware of the services occurring at the center. This person will also pay special attention to participants who may be present in the waiting rooms, parking areas, entrances, and exits, all while monitoring the arrival and departure. They will pay attention to security and safety concerns and be on-call for the monitors during visitations and exchanges to help problem-solve and support the monitor if an intervention is necessary. Working together, the floater and monitor can help minimize the need for formal security interventions, such as calling law enforcement for backup support.

The center's design should also consider that **children of every age** (newborn to age 18) could use center services. Programs should design a space that doesn’t make it exclusive to a particular age group. It is also important to remember that many families have children in multiple age ranges. It is not helpful to create age-specific spaces or rooms that would not allow multiple aged children in one family to feel welcomed or that the service is for them.

**Accessibility.** Ensuring that services comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, programs should ensure they are providing accessibility features such as wheelchair ramps, automatic doors, elevators, proper lighting, and more. There is no one-size-fits-all regarding accessibility, so programs should work to accommodate the needs of survivors and family members and note how factors such as security, confidentiality, and safety may change. Programs will want to consider the transportation needs of participants and determine the best location for services and whether access to public transportation applies to your community needs.



**Cultural considerations** will also impact site selection and the design of the program space. It is important to consider where services should be situated in the community and whether having services in a particular location would enhance or hinder the use of services. Services should be able to accommodate large and extended families.

Program staff will also want to explore how to accommodate providing services to populations that may feel more comfortable in a free-flowing open space or a more private space without other families in the same area. Space to share in food preparation and meals can be important for many families using services; supervised visitation and safe exchange programs will want to consider how the design of their space can safely address those accommodations.

**Shared Space vs. Dedicated Space.** Shared spaces come with several benefits, limitations, and considerations. Sharing space with similar programming, such as counseling services, supervised visitation, and safe exchange services, can take advantage of overlapping logistical needs and flow, furnishing, supplies, and janitorial and security services. These similar needs can lead to shared, and therefore lesser, costs, as well as allow programs to operate in spaces without needing to start all operations from new.

Shared spaces may also offer a greater sense of safety to survivors and families coming to supervised visitation and safe exchange programs. Some people might feel less isolated in shared spaces, knowing that others are nearby. Particularly if the program shares facilities with a larger organization, parents may feel more comfortable accessing supervised visitation or safe exchange services if the space has diverse uses.

There are some limitations to shared spaces, however. While these areas might offer a sense of anonymity to survivors and their families, it may prove more challenging for programs to guarantee confidentiality where there is a mix of different people and services in the same location.

It might also be difficult to ensure comfort and safety when the space regularly shifts from another service to a supervised visitation or safe exchange center. Furthermore, there may be added obstacles or logistics when communicating who is coming to the center and when.

Additionally, a stand-alone space allows programs to meet with families for orientations and check-ins as needed and allows opportunities for scheduled staff meetings and ongoing staff development and training during times when services are not being provided.

Dedicated spaces may present certain challenges as well. As mentioned above, survivors and families might feel more comfortable with the anonymity of accessing these services in spaces used for other purposes and may feel safer among more people. Above all, the cost can be a large barrier to keeping and running a space dedicated to supervised visitation and safe exchange services.

**Outdoor space.** Outdoor areas can be beneficial because they offer families a different kind of space to be together and share time together. Important factors to consider to make outdoor spaces safe and practical for everyone.

Because they are outdoors, programs must ensure these spaces remain secure. This includes assessing abduction concerns and ensuring that there are designated ways to enter and leave the space. As with indoor areas, there should be clear visual, physical, and auditory separation from those accessing the supervised visitation or safe exchange services and from any general public passing outside the center. One example of an ideal outdoor space would be an internal courtyard, which allows for safety and security alongside fresh air.

Outdoor spaces can also allow family pets to come to supervised visitation services, and staff should make sure they can manage safety for both pets and family members.

Outdoor play structures can be a great way for families to interact and connect. However, it is important to consider how visual, physical, and auditory separation factors might change depending on location. For example, a closed-off area might be visually and audibly separate when families are on the ground. Still, if a child climbs on top of a slide or similar structure, they may be visible from the street or another part of the building.

Finally, supervised visitation and safe exchange program staff should ensure that their regular safety, security, and confidentiality practices extend into outdoor areas. Visitation monitors should still be able to observe and do their jobs unimpeded by factors such as loud traffic or visual barriers in the space.



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