

## Building Staff Engagement in Discharge Practices Through Transparent Communication

### Agency Overview

- **Agency:** Safe Refuge
- **Population Served:** Adults ages 18 and older
- **Program Size:** Serves more than 200 clients across 72 residential beds, 96 Recovery Bridge Housing (RBH), and sober living settings.
- **Treatment Levels of Care:** Outpatient, intensive outpatient, residential (3.1 and 3.5), sober living, and contingency management programming.
- **Program Context:** With a large and diverse workforce serving clients across multiple residential and housing programs, Safe Refuge needed clear and consistent communication to ensure all staff understood the agency's discharge approach.

### Featured R95 Implementation Area

Establish a clear clinical review process before discharging clients and develop new policies that support client-centered practices, including not automatically discharging a client when they lapse, and making the rationale and procedures explicit.

### Impact

The shift in discharge practices helped clients feel less like they had “failed” when experiencing a lapse and more like they were being given a genuine opportunity to continue their recovery. Clients often returned to services with renewed motivation, and staff observed higher engagement and greater willingness to stay connected after setbacks.

## Implementation Challenges

Several challenges surfaced that shaped the adoption of client-centered policies. One central challenge was the absence of a formalized process.

- **Lack of a formalized policy:** Safe Refuge has a longstanding practice of not discharging clients after a lapse; however, this approach had not been formally documented in policy. The lack of codified procedures led to inconsistent interpretations, leaving staff unclear on the underlying rationale of the process and the specific steps to take when a client continued to use.
- **Varied staff understanding of purpose and intent:** Because the practice was not formalized or well-articulated across programs, staff had varied interpretations of when and how to use it, and many were unsure of the underlying purpose of the agency's approach. Staff perspectives and lived experiences also influenced how the policy was received.
- **Staff hesitation rooted in abstinence-based recovery models:** Some team members—particularly those whose own recovery was rooted in traditional abstinence models—questioned the practice and expressed opinions such as, “I did it this way, why can't they?” These differing perspectives created hesitation among staff about applying harm reduction approaches that aligned with R95.

Despite these challenges, implementing a clear discharge policy led to meaningful improvements in client engagement and staff confidence.

## Implementation Approach to Address Key Challenges

***At a Glance:** Safe Refuge centered its implementation on transparent communication, agency-wide training, and formalizing discharge practices that had been informally followed for years.*

Safe Refuge implemented several strategies that centered on communication, training, and clarified expectations.

- **Formalizing and clearly communicating policy expectations:** Leadership began by clearly communicating the R95 discharge policy across all levels of the organization. The Director emphasized why the policy mattered, grounding discussions in the value that “we work for the client” and the importance of supporting clients through relapse rather than removing them from care. To reinforce this message and ensure staff understood the policy consistently across programs, leadership expanded communication through structured training.
- **Building shared understanding through agency-wide training:** Safe Refuge coordinated an in-person training effort that included staff at all levels—security, kitchen, administration, counselors, clinical leadership, etc. Staff were trained over five months and provided multiple opportunities to attend training and participate in discussions. All staff received the same training on R95 concepts, which included sessions led by the Department of Public Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Control Bureau (SAPC). The training sessions created space for staff to openly discuss their feelings about the policy, ask questions, and voice concerns, which helped leadership understand staff perspectives and strengthened overall buy-in. Throughout this process, leadership emphasized the underlying principles behind the agency’s discharge approach. Safe Refuge continues to build R95 alignment by training all new hires and conducting yearly R95 training with current staff.
- **Clarifying the purpose of the policy:** During the communication and training process, the Director and leadership team consistently reinforced why the discharge approach was important, how it aligned with client-centered care, and why staff support was critical to applying the policy effectively and consistently.

## Lessons Learned

Safe Refuge’s journey offers several key takeaways for other agencies adopting client-centered models.

- **Be open to staff perspectives.** Creating intentional space for honest dialogue allows staff to express concerns, share lived experience and feel valued in the change process. When staff understand that leadership genuinely cares about their perspective, they become more open to adopting new practices, which strengthens confidence, consistency, and momentum during implementation.

- **Keep all staff engaged.** Training the entire workforce ensures that everyone understands the policy, why it matters, and how it affects their role. This agency-wide engagement builds collective buy-in, reduces uncertainty, and reinforces a shared commitment to applying the policy consistently across programs.

Safe Refuge demonstrates that formalizing practices through clear communication and staff engagement can strengthen an agency's ability to provide consistent, client-centered care. By articulating the rationale behind its long-standing discharge approach and creating clear expectations across programs, the agency built greater transparency, alignment, and confidence among staff. Their commitment to open dialogue and training built a unified, non-punitive culture that supports re-engagement and reinforces Safe Refuge's belief that relapse is part of recovery and clients deserve every opportunity to succeed.

### Learn More

Learn more about the Reaching the 95% (R95) Initiative and access additional resources on program design and implementation at the [Reaching the 95% website](#)