FAQs: Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs

This document provides information about programs in Minnesota that receive the state’s Safe Harbor grant funds to provide shelter and housing services specifically designed to serve sexually exploited and sex trafficked youth. There may be other residential programs in Minnesota that serve sexually exploited and sex trafficked youth that do not receive Safe Harbor shelter and housing funds, and information for those programs is not included in this document.

What are Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs?

They are programs that provide short-term shelter or longer-term housing with supportive services specifically designed to serve youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and/or sex trafficking. These programs are partially funded through legislatively appropriated Safe Harbor shelter and housing grant dollars administered by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

How many Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs are there and where are they located?

There are currently eight agencies, totaling 10 specific programs, funded by the state to provide Safe Harbor shelter and/or housing services. Currently, the Safe Harbor shelter and housing bed capacity statewide is 65 beds. The programs are located throughout the state including the metro area and greater Minnesota. Some are located in urban areas while others are in more rural locations. See the program information sheets for the cities where the programs are located. Each program is able to take referrals from anywhere in the state. More information on each program can be found on the program information sheets. Basic information on Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs can also be found on the Minnesota Department of Health’s Safe Harbor website, https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/safeharbor/response/housing.html.

What is the eligibility criteria for Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs?

Safe Harbor shelter and housing funds can be used to serve youth ages 24 and under who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation and/or sex trafficking; however, each program has its own specific eligibility criteria. They serve different age ranges, gender identities, and provide a variety of services and different levels of care. While each program does have standard eligibility criteria, they also consider each referral on an individual basis. Programs will take into account the youth currently in the program at the time of a referral, in order to maintain safety in the program. If program beds are full at the time of a referral, the program may have a waiting list. Each program has its own policies and procedures when it comes to maintaining a waiting list.

To find out more about specific program eligibility, see the program information sheets.
How do I make a referral to a Safe Harbor shelter and housing program?

Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs follow the No Wrong Door model of access, which means they can take referrals from any source, multiple systems and self-referrals. While each program will have its own process for accepting referrals, it should be able to consider referrals from any source. At times, programs may also have waiting lists, and each program has its own waiting list process. Most programs take referrals over the phone. See the program information sheets for specific contact information.

Can an individual with a serious mental health condition or a history of aggressive behaviors be accepted into a Safe Harbor shelter and housing program?

Individuals who have been sexually exploited or sex trafficked are victims of violence and have experienced trauma. As part of the experience of exploitation or trafficking, a youth may have been forced or coerced into being violent toward others. These experiences and trauma can sometimes result in violent, aggressive, or injurious behavior toward others or themselves. Safe Harbor programs implement trauma-informed services, understand the trauma responses of youth and provide supportive services and referrals to address youth’s mental health needs; however, there is still a level of mental health stability a youth must be able to maintain to be served in Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs. These programs are not medical settings and do not have the level of services or staffing needed to provide mental health crisis stabilization or in-patient medical care. Youth experiencing a mental health crisis who may be at risk of harm to themselves or others may require evaluation in a hospital setting or mental health crisis stabilization services to address their current mental health needs.

How are Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs paid for?

Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs receive Safe Harbor shelter and housing grant dollars that are appropriated by the Minnesota Legislature and administered through the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Agencies receive these funds through a competitive request for proposals process. The grant dollars only support a portion of these programs’ budgets. Programs are also funded through a variety of other sources including county per diem payments, other government grants, private foundation grants and individual private donations. Several of the Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs have county contracts that have set their county per diem rate. As with other out-of-home placements, when county staff (such as child welfare, children’s mental health or juvenile probation staff) place a youth at a Safe Harbor shelter or housing program through a court order or Voluntary Placement Agreement, the per diem rate for care is the responsibility of the placing agency.

What services are provided in a Safe Harbor shelter or housing program?

Each program is unique in the services they provide. At a minimum, each Safe Harbor shelter or housing program must provide a safe living environment, access to basic needs, educational support, case management services, and access to mental health services. Depending on the program, services to address mental health needs may be provided on site or through a partnership with another provider in the community. Additional services may include but are not limited to independent living skills, employment support, chemical health support, access to legal services, groups and curriculum to address sexual
exploitation and trafficking, culturally specific services and opportunities, and extracurricular activities. These services are specific to each program.

Programs provide services through the lens of trauma-informed care, harm reduction and the incorporation of youth voices. They adhere to the Safe Harbor No Wrong Door philosophies.

- Those who come in contact with youth should be trained to identify sexual exploitation.
- Youth have the right to privacy and self-determination.
- Services should be based in positive youth development.
- Services should be responsive to the needs of youth (gender-responsive, culturally responsive, age appropriate, supportive for LGBTQ youth, etc.).
- Youth who are sexually exploited are victims of a crime.
- Victims should not feel afraid, isolated or trapped.
- Sexual exploitation is traumatic. Victim-centered services should be based in trauma-informed care.

**Are Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs locked or secured?**

In alignment with the Safe Harbor philosophies listed above, none of the Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs are locked. Facility-based programs are staff secure and maintain safety as a top priority. The facility-based programs have cameras (in common areas and exterior) and security systems in place for safety reasons. In facilities serving minors, staff must know where youth staying in the program are at all times. If a youth flees from the program or their whereabouts become unknown, then staff would alert the appropriate authorities to respond.

**Are Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs licensed?**

All Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs that serve minors are licensed through the state. Most programs are licensed by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and one program, the Hearts for Freedom program at Heartland Girls Ranch, is licensed through the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

**How do I know if I should refer the youth I’m working with to a Safe Harbor shelter or housing program?**

If the youth you are working with is age 24 or younger and has experienced sexual exploitation or sex trafficking and is either not safe in their current housing situation or homeless, then a referral to one of the Safe Harbor shelter or housing programs would be appropriate. You can contact the Safe Harbor Regional Navigator¹ in your region for consultation, or contact specific Safe Harbor shelter or housing programs. Each individual youth and their situation is unique, and each individual Safe Harbor shelter and housing program

¹ A list of Navigators can be found at https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/safeharbor/response/navigators.html.
is unique. Based on program openings, location, program model, services provided, service population, etc., there may be a Safe Harbor shelter or housing program that meets the residential needs of the youth you are working with while also addressing their experiences of exploitation or trafficking.

If I am working with a youth staying at a Safe Harbor shelter or housing program, am I able to come into the facility to meet with the youth?

While providing youth access and connection to those who support them is essential, each program will have its own policies and procedures around who can enter the facility and when, for the purposes of maintaining the confidentiality and safety of all individuals staying in the facility. Please contact programs individually to learn more about their policies and procedures around meeting with individuals staying in a program.

I would like to talk more about Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs, or I have feedback I’d like to share. Who should I contact?

In most cases, questions about specific Safe Harbor shelter and housing programs would be answered by contacting the individual program directly. However, should you have more general questions about the Safe Harbor shelter and housing funds or the Safe Harbor response system, you can contact the department’s Safe Harbor program administrator, Dina Chou, at 651-431-3824 or dina.chou@state.mn.us, or Caroline Palmer, Safe Harbor statewide director at the Minnesota Department of Health, at 651-201-5492 or caroline.palmer@state.mn.us.

If you have a complaint or concern about a specific Safe Harbor shelter or housing program, the department encourages you to first connect with leadership at the program to express the concern, and/or follow the agency’s formal appeal/grievance process if appropriate. If the response from the specific program is not satisfactory or the issue is not resolved, individuals may also contact the department’s Safe Harbor program administrator, Dina Chou, at 651-431-3824 or dina.chou@state.mn.us.
Attention. If you need free help interpreting this document, call the above number.

651-431-4000

For accessible formats of this information or assistance with additional equal access to human services, write to dhsinfo@state.mn.us, call 651-431-4000, or use your preferred relay service. ADA1 (2-18)