

Managing Contraband and Use of Amnesty Boxes in Low Demand Programs

General Guidance on Contra-band:

Maintaining safety in a low demand homeless program presents special challenges. Sometimes residents will attempt to bring in drugs, alcohol, weapons or other items that could potentially harm the resident or other residents and staff. Introduction of contra-band should not be allowed. Traditional model homeless programs sometimes expel residents who attempt to introduce alcohol or drugs or other contraband. Low Demand Programs typically do not expel residents for incidents of this nature. However, Low Demand Programs are accustomed to managing problems of this nature and use a variety of safety practices to stop and reduce introduction of contraband and manage the incidents with the goal of helping residents comply with rules regarding contraband and retaining residents who violate contraband rules. This paper contains a compilation of practices our VA Safe Haven Programs have developed to reduce contraband introduction and the use of amnesty boxes for contraband in low demand programs.

- Rules regarding contraband should be made clear during resident orientation and periodic reminders of the rules should be made in resident community meetings.
- It may be helpful to post the rules in the entrance of the program.
- Most facilities inspect items brought into the facility during admission of the resident.
- Some facilities conduct bag searches when residents are returning to the facility.
- Many facilities also conduct periodic inspection of resident's personal belongings.

Low demand facilities rarely discharge residents for introduction of illicit drugs, drug paraphernalia, or alcohol. These items are confiscated and the incident is used as an opportunity for a therapeutic intervention regarding issues of this nature.

Introduction of guns, explosives, or other weapons often results in discharge, especially if it is determined that there is an intent to use the weapons. There may be some cases where the resident is carrying the weapon for protection. In such cases the weapon should be confiscated and after an assessment has been conducted, the resident may be allowed to stay if the program deems the resident, after confiscation of the weapon, is not a risk. Confiscation of weapons should occur in accordance with local law enforcement policy.

Use of Amnesty Boxes:

Many low demand programs use amnesty boxes to reduce contraband introduction into the facility, to increase safety, and to promote compliance of the residents with contraband policies. Amnesty boxes are placed at the entrance of the facility and provide a safe, secure means for the resident to dispose of contraband before entering the building. Amnesty boxes are used in secure areas of airports to assist travelers to dispose of prohibited items before boarding planes. Their use in homeless and rehabilitation programs is a more recent phenomenon.

The following issues should be considered when amnesty boxes are used by low demand programs:

- Amnesty boxes should be located in the entrance to the facility.
- The container should be of sturdy, steel construction and be locked.
- The container must be attached in a way that cannot be removed.
- The container should be constructed in a manner that does not allow residents to remove items and only staff should have access to the keys for the purpose of removing items.
- Residents should not face discipline or sanctions for use of the amnesty box.
- The program should maintain written policies for confiscation of contraband from the amnesty boxes.
- Weapons taken from the amnesty boxes should be disposed of in accordance with local law enforcement policy.

A photo example of an amnesty box is provided on page 3.

