

# Creating Welcoming Spaces

**'WELCOMING SPACES'** is a phrase referring to spaces that help connect people and create a sense of community. These are places where women can go to foster connections with each other, share resources and information and have a sense of belonging. A welcoming space can reduce a woman's feeling of isolation, enhance the capacity of women to build health and wellbeing, and serve as a haven from stigmatization and discrimination.

 Check off the physical components present in your space.

## Physical Space

One aspect of a welcoming space is the physical environment. The physical space at your organization is important for a few reasons:

- it sets the tone for the impression women will have of your organization
- the physical organization of space directs the flow of people, encouraging engagement
- the way space is designed has an impact on how women will experience your organization and develop a sense of connection

Research has shown that physical environments, when well designed around welcoming concepts, lead to higher rates of engagement and satisfaction. This means that welcoming spaces not only attract more women to come and participate in the organization, but that health outcomes for women can improve as well.

## Organizational Culture and Atmosphere

Organizational culture and atmosphere also play an important role in creating welcoming spaces. Consider the ways in which the structure and systems within your organization create a culture and atmosphere that normatively governs how people exist and operate in that space and how that can affect women living with and facing systemic risks for HIV.

Having these systems-level discussions isn't necessarily easy. Even when the policies exist, there are challenges in day-to-day practices that can negatively impact the women coming through your doors.

Having inclusive policies and making a commitment to working within a welcoming organizational culture makes your organization more appealing to women. These policies are the foundation of how people interact with each other in your space.

## Individual Staff Actions

As workers in community agencies, body language and what we say can impact the experience that women have when they come through the door. Being kind, warm, and treating people with patience and dignity can make a world of difference for women living with HIV, regardless of whether you know someone's status or not. Individual staff actions can be an important pathway to building trust and in creating space for women to share their experiences and expertise. These strategies also foster a trauma-informed approach in your community organization.

