



Competency Guidelines: Sheltering & Mass Care for Muslims

These guidelines are provided to inform cultural competency and reasonable religious accommodation mandates for U.S. Mass Care providers, and to assist staff and volunteers in competently meeting the needs of Muslims during disaster response or recovery operations—whether at a government or private shelter, or a shelter in a Mosque (Masjid, in Arabic) or any other house of worship.



In Mass Care registration or service settings, Muslims may or may not choose to self-identify and, despite common assumptions, their outward dress or appearance may not identify them as Muslims. Moreover, ethnic or regional garb does not necessarily indicate religious observance. For example, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and members of other faith communities from the Middle East or South Asia may also wear the same/similar ethnic clothing. Although some Muslims may feel comfortable raising concerns about their religious needs, others may not voice their concerns regarding any/all of the following issues.

SHELTERING

- **Greetings and Physical Interaction:** Upon entering a Mass Care setting, families and individuals who appear in Islamic dress or self-identify as Muslim will feel most welcome if staff demonstrate a willingness to respect and meet their cultural and religious needs. These first impressions matter. Staff must also recognize greeting customs, especially between males and females. Muslims greet one another, and can be greeted by, the Arabic salutation—*As-Salamu Alaykum* ("peace be upon you"). Muslims do not generally exchange handshakes with, or embrace, people of the opposite gender. Staff and other guests should understand that this is not a sign of rudeness, but a cultural and/or religious custom. Therefore, when greeting a Muslim of the opposite gender, one should wait until or if they extend their hand to shake, rather than first extending one's own.
- **Shelter Setting:** Due to religious prohibitions, Muslim families and individuals will be most comfortable in sleeping settings where men are segregated from women and children. When a communal sleeping space is the only option, it is customary for Muslim men and women to remain fully clothed and take turns sleeping in order to watch over their resting family. A gender segregated sleeping space, divided into same-gender areas by a curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable), is advised. Preadolescent Muslim children may accompany either parent or guardian, wherever they are most comfortable. However, where the family includes only an adult male and a preadolescent girl, shelter operators should attempt to allow the two to sleep in an area without women or adolescent boys.

PRAYER

- **Ritual Washing for Prayer:** Shelter operators and residents, should be made aware that many Muslims pray three to five times (or more) in every 24-hour period. These daily prayers (*Salat*) are preceded by a gender segregated washing ritual (*wudu*), which includes the washing of feet, hands, and face in clean running water—not a wash basin or bowl. If possible, and for the comfort of all shelter residents, it is preferable to have one designated wudu bathroom for men and one for women (an "out of view" distance from one another is preferable). If the bathroom space is limited, posted signs can alert residents of potential ritual use and indicate times this ritual use will take place. It is also appropriate to post signs that instruct all residents to keep the floor and sink areas dry, clean and safe.
- **Preparing a Muslim Prayer Space:** Particularly at a time of disaster or crisis, prayer is important to all people of faith. Although Islamic prayers can be offered at any place and any time, a designated prayer space is preferable. Muslims remove their shoes before entering a prayer room. It is customary for floors to be covered and it is a religious requirement that the space be free of images or religious iconography. In keeping with disaster chaplaincy best practices, a Mass Care chapel or prayer room should be established as a multi-faith space, without images or statues of any specific faith tradition. The area should be a quiet designated space with removable chairs, a plain table, and perhaps candles. Muslims will only pray in gender segregated groups within a common prayer space—men in front and women behind. On rare occasion, a partition or curtain separating males and females may be requested.

FEEDING

- **Halal Food:** Many Muslims follow religious dietary laws written in the Quran, the Muslim holy book. These dietary laws are defined by the Arabic terms *halal* (permitted) and *haram* (prohibited). In accordance with the Quran, pork and alcohol are examples of items considered to be haram. Therefore, many Muslims will only eat food from halal food sources, including caterers, purveyors, and MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Halal food sources include meat that has been ritually slaughtered (*zabiha*). Ideally, Mass Care meals should include a zabiha/halal option, or, if unavailable, a vegetarian option. In addition, snacks should not contain gelatin, meat, meat byproducts, or lard.
- **Ramadan Fast:** Muslims often fast from sunrise to sunset during the lunar month of Ramadan, the most sacred month in the Muslim religious calendar. Ramadan, a period of self-reflection and charitable acts or giving, includes ritual prayer, daytime fasting, and communal pre-dawn and sunset meals. While it can fall at anytime during the year, Ramadan will fall within the U.S. hurricane season for the next several years. During this month, shelter operators and feeding staff may need to offer adjusted/alternative mealtimes to accommodate their Muslim residents' dietary needs. During Ramadan, Muslims eat breakfast (*suhr/suhoor*) before dawn and refrain from eating and/or drinking until sunset, when they break their daily fast by eating dates with water (prescribed within the Quran) if available. Dinner (*iftar*) is followed by sunset prayers (*salatalMaghrib*) and a late night set of prayers, *Isha*, and then *Taraweeh*. Emergency managers and shelter staff should be aware of the physiological impact of fasting. Though many Muslims feel spiritually empowered during Ramadan, others also note that fasting takes its toll on their physical and mental acuity. Shelter staff should be sensitive to those who may sleep more than normal, be found reading from religious texts, or offering extra prayers.

MEDICAL, EMOTIONAL OR SPIRITUAL CARE

- When possible, religiously observant Muslims may be more comfortable in seeking and/or receiving assistance from same-gender service providers. Some may have difficulties in communicating openly or forthrightly with those of the opposite gender. Medical treatment rooms and bed wards must be gender segregated by curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable).

ISLAMIC DRESS

- Muslims may dress in clothing that may fall outside of American/Western fashion norms. Males may wear a small hat (*kufee*) or turban. Some may wear long robes (*thobes*) or a long shirt and pant set (*shalvar-kameese*). Some males may wear their pant-legs slightly shorter than the standard fashion. Females may wear a head covering (*hijab*) over their hair, ears, and neck. Some may cover their entire bodies with loose fitting clothing, covering all of their body, except for their face, feet, and hands, called an *abaya*. Though rare in the United States, some females may veil their faces, using what is called a *niqab*, wear elbow length gloves, or a *burka*, if covering the body from head to toe. Islamic dress is usually a combination of culture and ethnicity as much as piety. It is a false assumption that females are forced or required to dress modestly, and most would be deeply offended by that assumption. Islamic dress does not indicate a person's level of education or reflect on a particular conservative (or liberal) religious or political orientation.

ISLAM

Islam, the world's second largest religion, has an estimated one billion adherents. Approximately 2.6 million Muslims live in the U.S. and worship at over 2,100 masjids. Islam, which means "submission to Allah (God)," has five pillars: prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage to Mecca, and testifying on the oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Mohammad. Their holy book, the Quran/Koran speaks of caring for the poor, a day of judgment, and the afterlife. Islam is comprised of two major sects, Sunnis (the majority) and Shiites, and several other smaller sects. The religion is called Islam. ("Islamic" is an adjective; adherents are called Muslim.)

This Tip Sheet was written by NDIN in collaboration with:

Islamic Circle of North American-Relief, Islamic Relief USA and researchers at the University of Southern California-Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

