

# National Recommended Best Practices for Serving

# LGBT Homeless Youth



NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS





## LGBT YOUTH AND HOMELESSNESS

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are overrepresented in the homeless population. According to a growing body of research and study, a conservative estimate is that one out of every five homeless youth (20 percent) is LGBT-identified. This is greatly disproportionate to the estimated percentage of LGBT youth in the general population which is somewhere between 4 and 10 percent.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that each year, hundreds of thousands of LGBT youth will experience homelessness. Most LGBT youth become homeless because of family abuse, neglect, or conflict over their identity. Many homeless LGBT youth were kicked out of their homes while others ran from foster and group homes because they were mistreated or harassed.

LGBT youth are not only overrepresented in homeless youth populations, but reports indicate that while living on the streets, LGBT youth are at great risk of physical and sexual exploitation—at the hands of adults, police, and other youth. For example, one study concluded that LGBT homeless youth experience an average of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence toward them than their heterosexual peers.<sup>2</sup> Transgender youth in particular are often harassed, assaulted, and arrested by police because of their gender presentation. Another study found that LGBT youth may have twice the rates of sexual victimization on the streets as non-LGBT homeless youth, and LGBT youth report double the rates of sexual abuse before age 12.<sup>3</sup> In addition, LGBT homeless youth are more likely to report being asked by someone on the streets to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, and clothing than heterosexual homeless youth.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many LGBT homeless youth resort to trading sex to meet their basic needs.

Further, just trying to survive in street environments or with transitory and unstable housing can increase mental health problems and disabilities. One study found that lesbian homeless youth are more likely to have post-traumatic stress syndrome, conduct disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse problems than heterosexual homeless young women, and gay homeless young men are more likely to meet criteria for major depressive episodes.<sup>5</sup> Finally, LGBT homeless youth are also more likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) than their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent).<sup>6</sup>



Unfortunately, some LGBT homeless youth have experienced discriminatory practices and policies when trying to access homeless youth services. Others have been assaulted by peers based on their sexual orientation or gender identity<sup>7</sup> while participating in programs designed to help homeless youth stabilize their lives. Without access to the residential stability, nurturance, and opportunities for positive youth development provided by homeless youth service providers, LGBT homeless youth are susceptible to further challenges as adults and continued violence and exploitation on the streets, and are at great risk of entering the juvenile or criminal justice system.

All community-based agencies or programs serving adolescents should assume that some of their youth participants are LGBT even if they do not publically disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Whether offering shelter, housing, drop-in services, case management services, or street outreach, it is important that inclusive and culturally competent services are offered to enable LGBT homeless youth to stabilize their lives. While the outcomes for LGBT homeless youth—when they lack appropriate support and guidance—can be unsettling, LGBT youth can thrive and succeed if given the opportunity. Despite the stigma and violence that many LGBT youth experience, these youth often demonstrate remarkable courage and resilience. The following recommendations provide direction to agencies and not-for-profit organizations to increase their competency in working with LGBT youth.

### **Best Practice Recommendations for Homeless Youth Service Providers**

These recommendations are broken down into three sections. The first section includes steps intake workers, case managers, social workers, youth supervisors, and others who have regular, direct contact with youth should take to improve the experiences of LGBT youth accessing services. The second section includes steps administrators should take to improve agency-wide culture and effectiveness in serving LGBT youth. The final section includes specific steps both administrators and youth workers should take to improve the experiences of youth in residential settings, whether these settings are emergency shelters or longer term transitional living.

The recommendations are informed by the experiences of service providers and LGBT youth as reported to the Child Welfare League of America and Lambda Legal in 13 listening forums conducted nationwide, and through focus groups conducted by Legal Services for Children and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, as part of the Model Standards Project. During the listening sessions and focus groups, youth spoke on their experiences in out-of-home care, and offered suggestions for reform of practice and policy.

The recommendations are further informed by the legal and child welfare expertise of these respective organizations, as well as by the input of various advocates and service providers who are part of the National Advisory Council on LGBTQ<sup>8</sup> Homeless Youth. The following list of recommended best practices was reviewed by an advisory panel of professionals from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Lambda Legal, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the American Bar Association, and the National Network for Youth. Evaluation and selection were determined through consensus among the organizations and the recommendations were reviewed and edited by the National Advisory Council on LGBTQ Homeless Youth.

Though the recommendations listed here are specific to providing inclusive and culturally competent services to LGBT youth, it is extremely important to remember that many LGBT youth are also youth of color. Service providers, supervisors and administrators, should receive training on, and examine issues related to, race, racism, white privilege, and the intersection with gender and sexuality, in order to effectively respond to the needs of LGBT youth of color who are homeless.

Agencies can use this document to help determine the fundamental issues they need to address to best work with LGBT youth and to evaluate how well they are currently meeting the needs of the LGBT youth they serve. In addition, agencies can use the recommendations as a starting point for creating a broader action plan or as a blueprint for new initiatives. By implementing these recommendations agencies will move toward active affirmation and support for LGBT homeless youth—in stark contrast to the rejection and even brutality too many LGBT youth have experienced at home, in school, and in their communities.

**National Alliance to End Homelessness**

[www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org)

**National Network for Youth**

[www.nn4youth.org](http://www.nn4youth.org)

**Lambda Legal**

[www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

**National Center for Lesbian Rights**

[www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)

# 1 IMPROVING PRACTICES

## Recommendations for Employees Serving LGBT Homeless Youth

The following recommendations address how staff of organizations serving homeless LGBT youth can improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of their assistance.

### Treat LGBT Youth Respectfully and Ensure Their Safety

LGBT youth should have the same rights and privileges as other youth who use agency services. They should not be subjected to harsher or more restrictive standards of behavior because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They should be safe and free of harassment and violence when using agency services. It is crucial that LGBT youth feel safe and respected across the continuum of services provided by an agency. Staff should not tokenize LGBT youth or set them apart from other youth because of their identities, nor should facility staff ignore or dismiss LGBT youths' specific needs and experiences. All employees and volunteers at agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Examine their own beliefs and attitudes and ensure their ability to professionally and ethically serve their youth participants.
- Understand the common experiences of LGBT homeless youth, the factors that often lead to their homelessness, and the risks they face once they leave home.
- Be able to use the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender appropriately when talking with youth, other employees, and volunteers.
- Call youth participants by their preferred first name and pronoun in accordance with the youth's gender identity or expression.
- Know what to do when a youth self-discloses his or her sexual or gender identity (e.g., offer support, engage in conversation if youth wants to, maintain privacy, and locate appropriate services and support for the youth).
- Prevent harassment and discrimination by valuing and affirming differences and appropriately responding to

verbal, emotional, and physical threats against any youth.

- Never use anti-gay slurs or jokes, and appropriately intervene if others do.
- Be alert to signs of harassment or abuse that may not be obvious; be approachable for youth to come to with their concerns, and make decisions on how to respond based on the youths' best interests.
- If other agency staff members, volunteers, or youth participants are harassing or mistreating LGBT youth participants, staff must intervene to ensure the harassment stops immediately and take any further action needed.

### Appropriately Address LGBT Identity during Intake Process

Youths' perceptions of an agency begin with the initial contact with any worker or volunteer. If an LGBT youth receives the message—implicit or explicit—that he or she is not welcome because of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, the youth will be less likely to use the agency's services. An initial impression of openness and acceptance can help build the foundation for deepening trust and a more positive, productive experience for both youth and staff. If LGBT youth feel that the agency will accept them for who they are, they are more likely to disclose that they are LGBT, and agency staff will then be better able to offer services that will meet the youths' needs. All employees and volunteers who do intakes for agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Use intake forms that include questions about a youth's sexual orientation/gender identity in the demographics section, but do not make it a requirement that youth answer these questions.
- Ask questions in a way that avoids implicit assumptions about the sexual orientation or gender identity of youth participants (e.g., asking a youth if he or she is dating someone, rather than asking a girl if she has a boyfriend).

- Educate all incoming youth and staff about the agency’s nondiscrimination and harassment policies, what behaviors are prohibited, and what is expected of the youth. Clearly explain that homophobic comments and jokes as well as harassment based on race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and other differences will not be tolerated.
- Provide all youth participants with information about available local social services for LGBT youth and their families, including health and mental health services, community groups, supportive services for families, and social programs.

### Support Access to Education, Medical Care, and Mental Health Care

LGBT youth often face obstacles when accessing two of the most basic services that exist to promote their long-term well-being: education and health care. Health care providers that treat LGBT youth must be trained and educated on the heightened risks some of these youth face. Health care providers should be able to discuss sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual behaviors openly and comfortably, and health care providers must make no attempts to try to change a youth’s sexual identity. In educational settings, LGBT youth often face relentless bullying and harassment. Because receiving an education is a crucial part of a youth’s transition to adult life, it is essential that LGBT youth have access to educational environments where they can learn without fear of harassment and assault. All employees and volun-



teers at agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Determine whether LGBT runaway and homeless youth are attending school. If they are, ask whether or not they feel safe at school. If they are not attending school, determine whether harassment and assault are reasons the youth are no longer going to school.
- Address problem behaviors of bullying and harassment at school against LGBT youth participants and work with school staff to address this problem.
- Help connect school staff to training, consultation services, and youth service professionals to train schools on how to create a safe and appropriate school environment for transgender youth. This includes guidance on how to ensure transgender youth have access to safe and gender appropriate bathrooms, how to implement policies that require teachers and other staff to refer to youth using the youth’s preferred name/pronoun, and how to address bullying and harassment aimed at transgender students.
- Contract only with health and mental health providers who have been trained on the specific health needs of LGBT youth and who are open and comfortable with youth of all sexual orientations and gender identities if agencies provide medical and mental health services to homeless youth.
- Avoid clinicians who exhibit homophobic attitudes or who may engage in inappropriate and questionable practices that attempt to alter a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
- Help LGBT youth participants find appropriate sexual health services through referrals to inclusive resources in the community.
- Ensure that all materials provided to youth participants about safer-sex are affirming of LGBT people and include information that addresses safer-sex techniques for LGBT youth.

### Support Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Youth Participants

Transgender youth have needs that are distinct from those of LGB youth. For example, they may need transition-related health care or help getting a state identification that includes their chosen name and has the

appropriate gender marker. In addition, because most shelter and other congregate care living programs are segregated by gender, facility staff are often unsure how to classify transgender youth and may simply classify them based on their birth gender without realizing that this negatively affects the youth's physical and emotional safety. In order to serve transgender youth competently and keep them safe, all employees and volunteers at agencies that serve homeless youth should:

- Understand what it means for a youth to be transgender, recognizing that transgender youth will have diverse experiences and ways of talking about their self-identity.
- Use transgender-related terms appropriately.
- Avoid assumptions about the sexual orientation of transgender young people. Understand that a person's sexual orientation relates to who someone is attracted to and a person's gender identity relates to how the person understands his or her gender. Transgender youth can be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- Allow transgender youth to express their gender identity through their chosen attire, hairstyle, and mannerisms while using agency services.
- Call transgender youth by the names and pronouns they prefer. It is always OK to politely ask a youth which pronoun he or she prefers if the youth does not volunteer this information. (e.g., "Do you prefer if people refer to you using female pronouns, she and her, or male pronouns, he and him?")
- Have general knowledge about Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and the WPATH<sup>9</sup> recognized standards for diagnosing and treating youth and adults with GID.
- For agencies providing medical and mental health services to homeless youth, ensure that transgender youth have access to providers who are competent to provide counseling, hormone therapy, and other medical treatment in line with professional (WPATH) standards and can provide transgender youth with individualized medical and psychological assessments.
- Ensure transgender youth receive or are able to access all transition-related treatment recommended by the health care provider's assessment.

- Take appropriate steps to advocate on behalf of the transgender youth participants if they are not safe on the streets or in school.
- Locate resources and programs that can assist transgender youth participants with their unique legal issues such as getting their names changed and obtaining legal identity documents—birth certificate, state identification card, driver's license—that reflect the gender with which they identify.
- Identify resources and programs that provide transgender specific services, including counseling and groups where transgender youth can get support, meet other transgender youth, and learn more about themselves.
- Agencies that provide long-term housing support, such as transitional living programs, should ensure meaningful opportunities for education, job training and employment that help transgender youth successfully transition to independent adulthood.

### **Inform LGBT Youth Participants about Local LGBT Programs and Services**

LGBT youth may be hesitant to access social services and other programs because they are afraid that these services will not be LGBT-friendly. Unfortunately, their reluctance is often based on past negative experiences. Helping homeless LGBT youth access the range of services they need means connecting them to resources they can count on as being LGBT-friendly. Agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Help LGBT youth participants access LGBT community services and supportive adult mentors.
- Develop and regularly update lists of resources in the community, including services directed to the LGBT community. Distribute them to everyone in the agency, including to youth who may wish to access community resources privately. A Community Resource guide should include:
  - Options for LGBT-friendly long term housing;
  - Information about local LGBT community centers;
  - Locations of LGBT-friendly medical and mental health professional services;
  - Information about laws that protect LGBT people in the jurisdiction;



- Contact information for LGBT civil rights organizations;
  - Locations of recreation centers safe for LGBT youth participants;
  - Employment resources and opportunities helpful to LGBT youth participants.
- Ensure that staff provides LGBT youth participants with information about any agency services available that address individual, family, and health issues around sexual orientation and/or gender identity, once the youth discloses to the agency's staff that he or she is LGBT.
  - Talk to youth one-on-one about resources that might be helpful for meeting specific needs.
  - Encourage agency and program staff to visit other community resources and agencies to experience what will happen when a youth visits the site.



## 2 IMPROVING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

### Recommendations for Administrators and Supervisors

Decisions made by agency administrators about hiring, policy adoption and implementation, training, volunteer recruitment, and other areas significantly affect the day-to-day functioning of the agencies and the experiences of all youth. Administrators' consistent communication that creating an LGBT-friendly and competent agency is a priority can jumpstart and inject momentum into the process of improving agency performance. Directors, managers, and supervisors must demonstrate knowledge on LGBT youth issues and offer support and leadership in implementing competent service to LGBT youth.

#### Programmatic Culture: Creating a Safe and Inclusive Environment.

Youth participants are keenly aware of their surroundings and often make judgments regarding programs based on a quick assessment of the office structure, visual signs, and culture. Those offering programs should be aware of the appearance of their facilities and strive to create an environment of nonjudgmental acceptance for LGBT youth participants entering the premises for the first time. To create this environment, agencies should do the following:

- Create a positive physical environment in the work place. Display LGBT supportive images such as pink triangles, rainbows, or hate-free/safe zone stickers to send a clear message to all youth and staff that LGBT people are welcome at the agency.
- Demonstrate knowledge on LGBT youth issues and offer support and leadership in implementing LGBT-competent services.
- Use community outreach material that enforces program practices in welcoming LGBT youth and reassures them there is a safe space for the youth in the facility.
- Offer materials and accessible services to parents and guardians to learn about sexual orientation and gender

identity. Facilitate acceptance of the youth's sexual orientation and gender identity and seek improvement in familial communication and nurturing behavior.

#### Adopt and Implement Written Nondiscrimination Policies

Nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies provide the minimal standard for work with LGBT homeless youth. Having a nondiscrimination policy that is widely distributed and fully enforced communicates a basic commitment to creating an LGBT-safe environment and also helps make an agency more identifiable as a possible resource for LGBT homeless youth. In order to ensure that LGBT youth participants know that an agency is committed to preventing harassment and discrimination, agencies should do the following:

- Adopt and implement written policies that prohibit both discrimination and harassment against youth and staff on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or HIV status. The policies should apply not only to employees, but also to contractors and volunteers.
- Adopt written policies outlining a grievance procedure for LGBT youth and staff to report discrimination, harassment, or abuse and offer guidance on appropriate responses to discrimination, harassment, or abuse by personnel, youth participants, and volunteers.
- Ensure that all youth participants, employees, contractors, and volunteers receive notice of the nondiscrimination policy, both written and verbal.
- Let all youth participants know they are expected to treat everyone in accordance with this policy.
- Provide initial and ongoing professional training on the policy and its application to all employees and volunteers, as well as to contract service providers like health

and mental health providers to ensure effective implementation of the nondiscrimination policy.

Nondiscrimination policies can only make a true difference in agency culture if mechanisms are in place for policy implementation and accountability. Periodic self-assessments and updated action plans with input from staff, youth, volunteers, administrators, and other stakeholders can help agencies assess overall consistency between policy provisions and agency practice. To give “teeth” to nondiscrimination policies, agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Ensure grievance procedures allow for confidential complaints and neutral third-party investigations.
- Prohibit retaliation against an individual who files a complaint of discrimination or harassment or participates in an investigation of such a complaint.
- Ensure that supervisory and management staff treat all incidents of discrimination or harassment seriously and follow up promptly by initiating a grievance according to the agency’s grievance procedure.
- Ensure that all youth who access agency services are aware of their rights and are given clear instructions on how to file a complaint of discrimination or harassment.
- Develop accountability standards that assess agency staff performance in supporting LGBT youth participants and that track complaints of policy violations.

## Adopt Confidentiality Policies

When youth disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to service providers, they are sharing private, sensitive information. Even LGBT people who are “out of the closet” are generally not “out” to every person in their lives—even if they have been out for years and are active in LGBT communities. LGBT youth should be able to determine to whom they wish to come out. Agencies should adopt strict policies around managing confidential information about a young person’s sexual orientation and gender identity in addition to other sensitive information like HIV status. Staff should be aware that a misplaced disclosure—to a family member who is not ready to digest this information or to a homophobic

peer—can have deeply negative consequences and may even result in harassment and violence. Agencies offering direct services to LGBT homeless youth should do the following:

- Adopt written policies regarding the management of information about a youth participant’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status.
- Ensure that staff do not disclose a youth participant’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status without the young person’s permission, unless limited disclosure is required by law to protect a young person’s safety. When disclosure is legally required, staff should explain, to the youth participant, who is entitled to the information and why.

## Provide LGBT Competency Training to All Agency Employees and Volunteers

Older adolescents often grow and change in the context of relationships with others. Professional and volunteer staff or community-based organizations are a crucial link between youth participants and the attainment of individual goals. Staff should be trained to ensure ongoing competence and professionalism in serving LGBT homeless youth and to create professionalism among team members. Agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Provide initial and ongoing comprehensive LGBT competency training for all staff including administrators, managers, supervisors, social workers, case workers, direct service staff, support staff, facilities maintenance personnel, volunteers, and health and mental health providers with whom the agency contracts.
- Include the following topics in trainings and offer trainings that are tailored to specific service components provided by the agency:
  - A review of vocabulary and definitions relevant to LGBT youth;
  - An exploration of myths and stereotypes regarding LGBT youth and adults;
  - Information about how to communicate sensitively with youth about sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity;

- Information on developmental issues and adaptive strategies for LGBT children and youth;
- A review of the coming-out process and how adults can support a young person who is coming out;
- A discussion of how sexual orientation and/or gender identity may relate to the reasons a young person is homeless or has run away, including parental reactions;
- A discussion of the social issues and challenges unique to transgender or gender-nonconforming youth;
- Guidance on how to serve LGBT youth respectfully and equitably;
- Information about community resources available to serve LGBT youth and their families;
- Information about the agency’s nondiscrimination policy and any applicable state nondiscrimination laws;
- Discussion about the importance of confidentiality for LGBT youth and how to comply with state and agency confidentiality rules and policies;
- Discussion about the intersection of race, culture, socioeconomic status, white privilege, and other cultural factors with sexual orientation and gender identity.

### Establish Sound Recruitment and Hiring Practices

In order to ensure that all youth clients are competently served by agencies that provide homeless youth services, agency administrators should inquire into a potential hire’s past work experience, his or her ability to do the tasks required by the position, and his or her ability to competently work with the diverse population of youth the agency serves, including LGBT youth. Administrators can prevent problems down the line—like cases in which staff are unable to separate their personal biases against LGBT youth from their professional obligations—by informing applicants that the agency is committed to serving all youth in a nondiscriminatory manner and asking about prior experience working with LGBT youth. More specifically, the agency should:

- Ensure that the recruiting and hiring processes are clear about core skills and competencies needed to provide direct services to LGBT homeless youth.
- Create and monitor goals for the hiring and retention of a diverse staff that reflects the diversity of the population served.
- Offer support and leadership in implementing LGBT-competent services.
- Appropriately reprimand and/or remove homophobic or unsupportive staff, contract employees, and volunteers.
- Establish personnel goals which guide staff to celebrate and nurture a youth’s sexual orientation and gender identity and not simply accept or tolerate it.

### Develop Agency Connections to LGBT Organizations and the LGBT Community

One of the best ways to stay on top of local LGBT youth resources in the community is to develop connections with local resources and with the LGBT community more generally. In addition, by developing relationships with other providers who serve local LGBT youth, agencies will be better able to determine how to reach out to LGBT youth who are not receiving any services. Administrators should encourage staff members to:

- Get involved with local networks of organizations that are concerned with the welfare of LGBT people generally.
- Develop collaborations with LGBT community groups to support the establishment of services for LGBT run-away and homeless youth.
- Build a stronger network of LGBT people and allies within the agency and agency contractors.
- Commit to outreach in areas where LGBT youth have been known to congregate.
- Regularly review all local resources to find those that are LGBT-friendly.
- Use or refer to health and mental health providers who have been trained on the specific health needs of transgender youth and who understand the professional standards of care for transgender people.



## Collect and Evaluate Data

Good data on the numbers of LGBT youth accessing services can help agencies determine whether they need expanded services for this population. Data can also serve as a powerful education tool for board members and other key decision makers when pursuing programmatic expansion. At the same time, accurate data is extremely difficult to obtain because many youth are reluctant to self-identify, especially when data is not collected sensitively. Agencies that serve homeless youth should do the following:

- Incorporate questions about a youth participant's sexual orientation and gender identity status into demographic data elements and evaluation tools to determine accessibility and outcomes specific to LGBT youth.
- Compare data and outcome measures to determine if any disparity of treatment is noted between LGBT youth participants and heterosexual youth participants.
- Ensure that data is collected by individuals trained on how to respectfully ask questions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and on how to maintain confidentiality.

## 3 IMPROVING RESIDENTIAL SERVICES

### Recommendations for Administrators and Youth Workers

#### Keep LGBT Youth Safe in Shelters and Other Residential Services

There are a handful of facilities across the country that offer specific shelter and residential services to LGBT homeless youth, but these programs only provide a very small fraction of the number of beds needed to house all LGBT homeless youth, and in some cases these facilities are not appropriate for particular LGBT youth. It is important for LGBT youth to feel safe and comfortable in all local emergency shelters and transitional living programs. If LGBT youth do not feel comfortable staying in a shelter because of fear of violence or harassment they will not use these services. There are several steps that agencies can take to better meet the needs of LGBT homeless youth.

Agencies that provide shelter and other residential services to homeless youth should do the following:

- Ensure that LGBT youth participants are not treated differently from heterosexual youth in shelter placement determinations.
- Ensure that staff never automatically isolate or segregate LGBT youth from other participants for the LGBT youths' protection.
- Inform LGBT youth participants of the different types of sleeping arrangements available, including beds close to direct care staff if the youth participant prefers to be in eyeshot/earshot of staff.
- Ensure that transgender or gender-nonconforming youth participants are not automatically placed based on their assigned sex at birth, but rather in accordance with an individualized assessment that takes into account their safety and gender identity.
- Ensure that individual LGBT youth participants are not placed in a room with another youth who is overtly hostile toward or demeaning of LGBT individuals.
- Allow transgender youth to use bathrooms, locker rooms, showers, and dressing areas that keep these youth physically and emotionally safe and provide sufficient privacy.
- Ensure that staff do not prohibit LGBT youth participants from having roommates or isolate these youth from other youth based on the false assumption that LGBT youth are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors.
- Maintain regular contact with youth participants placed in scattered-site housing units (apartments in the community) to protect them from emotional isolation and ensure they are free from harassment and discrimination.
- Create a safety plan for youth placed in scattered-site housing to respond to verbal harassment, physical threats to safety, and sexual exploitation by neighbors and community members.

## ■ CLOSING

Given the overrepresentation of LGBT youth in homeless populations and their increased levels of abuse and exploitation in street environments, agencies and programs serving homeless youth should adopt competencies to adequately serve the needs of LGBT youth participants. The recommended best practices noted above are the first guidelines in the United States dedicated to building cultural proficiency and positive programmatic practices to meet the needs of LGBT homeless youth. Agencies can use this document to evaluate how well they are currently meeting the needs of LGBT homeless youth or as a starting point for creating a broader action plan for new initiatives.

A significant portion of the recommendations was created by LGBT youth and reviewed by an advisory panel of professionals with the National Advisory Council on LGBTQ Homeless Youth, including representatives from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Lambda Legal, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the American Bar Association, and the National Network for Youth. The National Advisory Council on LGBTQ Homeless Youth anticipates these best practice recommendations and comments will be widely circulated, critically studied, improved upon, and implemented to improve the lives of LGBT homeless youth.



## Notes

1. Dempsey, Clea L. 1994. Health and Social Issues of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Families in Society* 75, no. 3: 160-167. It should be noted that a youth's need for social desirability may result in underreporting when asked about issues pertaining to sexual orientation, gender identity, and family and personal substance abuse.
2. Cochran, Bryan N., Stewart, Angela J., Ginzler, Joshua A., and Ana Mari Cauce. 2002. Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Adolescents With Their Heterosexual Counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5: 773-777. Rew, Lynn, Tayler-Seehafer, Margaret and Maureen Fitzgerald. 2001 Sexual Abuse, Alcohol and Other Drug Use, and Suicidal Behaviors in Homeless Adolescents. *Issues in Contemporary Pediatric Nursing* 24: 225-240.
3. Rew, Lynn, Whittaker, Tiffany A., Taylor-Seehafer, Margaret, and Lorie R. Smith. 2005. Sexual Health Risks and Protective Resources in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Homeless Youth. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing* 10, no. 1: 11-20.
4. Van Leeuwen, James M., Boyle, Susan, Salomonsen-Sautel, Stacy, Baker, D Nico, Garcia, JT, Hoffman, Allison and Christian J. Hopfer. 2006. Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Homeless Youth: An Eight City Public Health Perspective. *Child Welfare*, 85, no. 2: 151-170.
5. Whitbeck, Les B., Chen, Xiaojin, Hoyt, Dan R., Tyler, Kimberly A. and Kurt D. Johnson. 2004. Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies, and Victimization Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents. *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 4: 329-342.
6. Van Leeuwen, James M., Boyle, Susan, Salomonsen-Sautel, Stacy, Baker, D Nico, Garcia, JT, Hoffman, Allison and Christian J. Hopfer. 2006. Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Homeless Youth: An Eight City Public Health Perspective. *Child Welfare* 85, no. 2: 151-170. See also, Whitbeck, Les B., Chen, Xiaojin, Hoyt, Dan R., Tyler, Kimberly A. and Kurt D. Johnson. 2004. Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies, and Victimization Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents. *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 4: 329-342.
7. Gender identity is a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being male or female, or something other or in-between. A person's gender identity may or may not conform to physical anatomy.
8. See Glossary
9. For information about GID and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) visit their website: [www.wpath.org](http://www.wpath.org). If you wish to review the WPATH standards of care, please see [http://www.wpath.org/publications\\_standards.cfm](http://www.wpath.org/publications_standards.cfm).



## Glossary of Terms

- Bisexual:** a person who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to both men and women.
- Coming out:** the process of disclosing one’s sexual orientation or gender identity to others. Because most people in our society are presumed to be heterosexual, coming out is not a discrete event, but a lifelong process. Heterosexual family members or allies of LGBT persons also experience “coming out” when they disclose to others that they have friends or relatives who are LGBT.
- Gay:** a person whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for individuals of the same sex, typically in reference to men. In some contexts, still used as a general term for gay men and lesbians.
- Gender expression:** a person’s expression of his or her gender identity (see below), including characteristics and behaviors such as appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions.
- Gender identity:** a person’s internal, deeply felt sense of being male or female, or something other, or in-between. Everyone has a gender identity.
- Gender identity disorder (GID):** a strong, persistent desire to be the opposite sex, as well as persistent discomfort about one’s anatomical sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role corresponding to one’s anatomical sex. GID is a diagnosable medical condition found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*.
- Gender-nonconforming:** having or being perceived to have gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender-nonconforming people may or may not identify as LGBT.
- Genderqueer:** a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with the restrictive and binary terms that have traditionally described gender identity (for instance, male or female only). Also see *gender-nonconforming*, *queer*, and *transgender*.
- Heteronormativity:** a belief system that assumes heterosexuality is normal and that all people are heterosexual.
- Heterosexism:** a belief system that assumes that heterosexuality is inherently preferable and superior to other forms of sexual orientation.
- Heterosexual:** a person whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for individuals of a different sex. Sometimes referred to as straight.
- Homophobia:** fear, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against: homosexuality, LGBT people, individuals perceived as LGBT, and people associated with LGBT people.
- Homosexual:** a term used to refer to a person based on his or her same-sex sexual orientation, identity, or behavior. Many LGBT people prefer not to use this term—especially as a noun—because of its historically negative use by the medical establishment.
- Intersex:** a term used to refer to an individual born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not conform exclusively to male or female norms in terms of physiological sex (this may include variations of genetics, genital or reproductive structures, or hormones). According to the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)—an organization that advocates and educates about intersex concerns—about one in every 2,000 children is born intersex. Many intersex people prefer this term to the historically negative term *hermaphrodite*. An intersex person may or may not identify as LGBT.

**In the closet:** keeping one’s sexual orientation or gender identity secret.

**LGBT:** common acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning—persons who despite their differences are often discriminated against in similar ways. Sometimes written to include I for Intersex, and/or A for Ally. May also be written as LGBTQ or GLBTQ.

**Lesbian:** a woman whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for other women.

**Queer:** an historically derogatory term for a gay man, lesbian, or gender-nonconforming person. The term has been widely re-claimed, especially by younger LGBT people, as a positive social and political identity. It is sometimes used as an inclusive, or umbrella, term for all LGBT people. More recently, *queer* has become common as a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with the restrictive and binary terms that have traditionally described sexual orientation (for instance, gay, lesbian, or bisexual only). Some LGBT community members still find *queer* an offensive or problematic term. Also see *genderqueer*.

**Questioning:** an active process in which a person explores his or her own sexual orientation and/or gender identity and questions the cultural assumptions that he or she is heterosexual and/or gender-conforming. Many LGBT people go through this process before “coming out.” Not all people who question their identities end up self-identifying as LGBT.

**“Reparative” or “Conversion” Therapy:** an intervention intended to change an individual’s sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, which is not condoned by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, or other major professional associations.

**Sexual orientation:** a term describing a person’s emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction, whether it is for members of the same sex or a different sex. More appropriate than “sexual preference.” A person’s sexual orientation may or may not dictate the person’s sexual behavior or actions.

**Straight:** A term often used to identify a person as heterosexual.

**Transgender:** an umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is nonconforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth. This term can include transsexuals, genderqueers, cross-dressers, and others whose gender expression varies from traditional gender norms.

**Transition:** the time period when a transgender person starts living as the gender he or she identifies as. Often includes a change in style of dress, selection of new name, a request that people use the correct pronoun, and possibly hormone therapy and/or surgery.

**Transphobia:** fear, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender people or people who are gender-nonconforming.

**Transsexual:** a term for someone who transitions from one physical sex to another in order to bring his or her body more in line with his or her innate sense of gender identity. It includes those who were born male but whose gender identity is female, and those who were born female but whose gender identity is male, as well as people who may not clearly identify as either male or female. Transsexual people have the same range of gender identities and gender expression as non-transsexual people. Many transsexual people refer to themselves as transgender.



**Organizations Supporting the Dissemination of the  
National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth**

Ali Forney Center, New York, NY

The Attic Youth Center, Philadelphia, PA

Avenues for Homeless Youth/GLBT Host Home Program, Minneapolis, MN

Children's Service Society of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Support Project of  
Health Care of Southeastern Massachusetts, Inc., Brockton, MA

Green Chimneys Children's Services, NYC Programs, New York, NY

Larkin Street Youth Center, San Francisco, CA

Latin American Youth Center, Washington, DC

Metropolitan Community Churches, Global Justice Ministries, New York, NY

Metropolitan Community Churches, Homeless Youth Services, New York, NY

Milwaukee LGBT Community Center, Milwaukee, WI

National Black Justice Coalition, Washington, DC

San Diego Youth Services, San Diego, CA

Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, Washington, DC

Sylvia Rivera Law Project, New York, NY

Teen Living Programs, Chicago, IL

Transgender Health Empowerment, Inc., Washington, DC

Utah Pride Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Walden Family Services, Inc., San Diego, CA

YouthCare, Seattle, WA