

Working with Homeless LGBTQ Youth

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (“LGBTQ”) youth become homeless in this country at rates that should alarm anyone working in the child welfare and shelter care systems. Many LGBTQ youth feel compelled to run away from their families or child welfare placements after their physical and emotional safety is jeopardized. Others are thrown out of their homes with nowhere to go but the streets. Still others have aged out of the child welfare system, unprepared to support themselves and without a permanent place to live. If the out-of-home systems of care are not safe and appropriate for LGBTQ youth, these young people attempt to forge a life on the streets rather than seek services and supports from these systems.

UNDERSTAND HOW HOMELESS AND RUNAWAY YOUTH SHELTERS ARE FAILING LGBTQ YOUTH.

Homeless and runaway LGBTQ youth too often are misunderstood and mistreated by the staff and other residents at temporary shelters. Harassment, assault and even rape within these facilities are common experiences. The data is sobering: half of a sampling of lesbian and gay youth who had been in out-of-home care settings reported that they had spent periods of time living on the streets in preference to the hostile environments they had found in these settings.¹

DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE RISKS FACED BY HOMELESS LGBTQ YOUTH.

Being homeless imperils a young person’s physical and emotional security. According to a 2002 study by the University of Washington, LGBTQ homeless youth are physically or sexually victimized on average by seven more people than non-LGBTQ homeless youth.² With nowhere to go and no means of support, some may be forced to engage in survival behaviors that place them at significantly higher risk for mental health problems, substance abuse and exposure to sexually transmitted infections. Some of these survival activities,

such as sex work, are illegal, leading many LGBTQ homeless youth to encounters with the juvenile justice and delinquency systems. It’s important that child welfare and shelter care services acknowledge these risks and prevent young people from feeling as though they have no other choice but to take them.

PROVIDE SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE CHILD WELFARE SERVICES TO YOUTH THROWN OUT OF OR FLEEING ABUSIVE FAMILIES.

Many LGBTQ homeless and runaway youth have sought assistance from the police and child welfare systems after their families have abused them because they are LGBTQ, but have been turned away due to a lack of sensitivity about the serious issues they are facing. Some are even forced by social workers and police officers to return home to unsafe environments. If placed in care, many find that they are not safe in their placements. A 2006 study found that 65% of 400 homeless LGBTQ youth reported having been in a child welfare placement in the past.³ The large number of homeless LGBTQ youth in part reflects that the child welfare system is failing these young people.

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

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ENSURE THE SAFETY OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN HOMELESS SHELTERS AND CHILD WELFARE FACILITIES.

Given the number of LGBTQ youth cycling between the child welfare and shelter systems of care, it's critically important that all shelters and child welfare facilities take immediate steps to ensure the safety of these young people. Every agency providing shelter care and services should adopt and enforce LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, provide training on LGBTQ issues for all staff and display visible signs of support for LGBTQ people. It's crucial to send a clear message throughout each facility that anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination will not be tolerated.

RESPOND TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF HOMELESS TRANSGENDER YOUTH.

Transgender homeless youth often are especially unsafe at run-away and homeless shelters that require them to be assigned to beds according to biological sex and not gender identity or expression. These insensitive shelter policies may cause a transgender youth who identifies and presents as female to be placed in a male facility, where that young person is at increased risk of abuse and rape. Furthermore, sex-segregated bathrooms, locker rooms and dressing areas within these facilities are often inappropriate and unsafe for transgender youth. As is the case with lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning youth, transgender youth who are unsafe in shelters are more likely to run away. On the streets they frequently find a thriving, oftentimes dangerous, black market for cross-sex hormones and other medical procedures they seek to align their physical bodies with their gender identities. Those providing care and services to homeless transgender youth should link these youth with appropriate medical service providers in their communities to reduce the risk that they will take their healthcare into their own hands on the streets.

MAKE APPROPRIATE, INDIVIDUALIZED CLASSIFICATION AND HOUSING DECISIONS.

Don't make housing decisions within homeless youth shelters based on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. For example, never assume that all LGBTQ youth are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors than their heterosexual peers, or that they're all potential sex offenders. Conversely, don't unnecessarily isolate or segregate LGBTQ young people, or prohibit them from having roommates, as a means to ensure their safety. While this may be motivated by good intentions, it will only deprive LGBTQ youth of opportunities to interact with their peers and will compound their feelings of isolation.

CREATE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS FOR HOMELESS LGBTQ YOUTH.

Help homeless LGBTQ youth to access community services and supportive adult mentors, and stand up for them if they encounter negative biases and discrimination. Develop an up-to-date list of LGBTQ resources in the community and distribute it to everyone in the agency, including to youth who may wish to contact community resources privately.

DISPLAY LGBTQ-SUPPORTIVE SIGNS AND SYMBOLS.

By displaying LGBTQ-supportive images such as pink triangles, rainbows or safe zone stickers, shelter care facilities send the clear message to all youth and staff that LGBTQ youth are welcomed and affirmed. LGBTQ youth are quick to pick up on these cues from their environment; it often makes an enormous difference just seeing them displayed. Lambda Legal's LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care poster is available in English and Spanish free-of-charge online (www.lambdalegal.org).

CONNECT WITH ADDITIONAL RESOURCES.

National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth, co-authored by Lambda Legal and other national organizations, offers agencies guidance to improve care for homeless LGBT youth. Free copies can be downloaded at www.lambdalegal.org/issues/youth-in-out-of-home-care or ordered from Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTTeen (toll free) or 212-809-8585.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness, authored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, discusses the reasons why so many LGBT youth are homeless and the risks they face in shelters and on the street. Free copies can be downloaded at www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/homeless_youth.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.endhomelessness.org) offers resources and information about youth homelessness in general.

The many other components of Getting Down to Basics offer additional support.

To order free copies of the *Getting Down to Basics* tool kit, contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTTeen (toll free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at www.lambdalegal.org or www.cwla.org.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *We Don't Exactly Get the Welcome Wagon: The Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Adolescents in the Child Welfare Systems*, Mallon, Gerald P., Columbia University Press 1998.
- ² "Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Homeless Adolescents with their Heterosexual Counterparts," Cochran, B. N., Stewart, A., Ginzler, J. A., & Cauce, A. M., *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 92, 2002.
- ³ "Putting the Pieces Together for Queer Youth: A Model of Integrated Assessment of Need and Program Planning," Berberet, H., *Child Welfare Journal*, Vol. 85, No. 2, 2006.

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