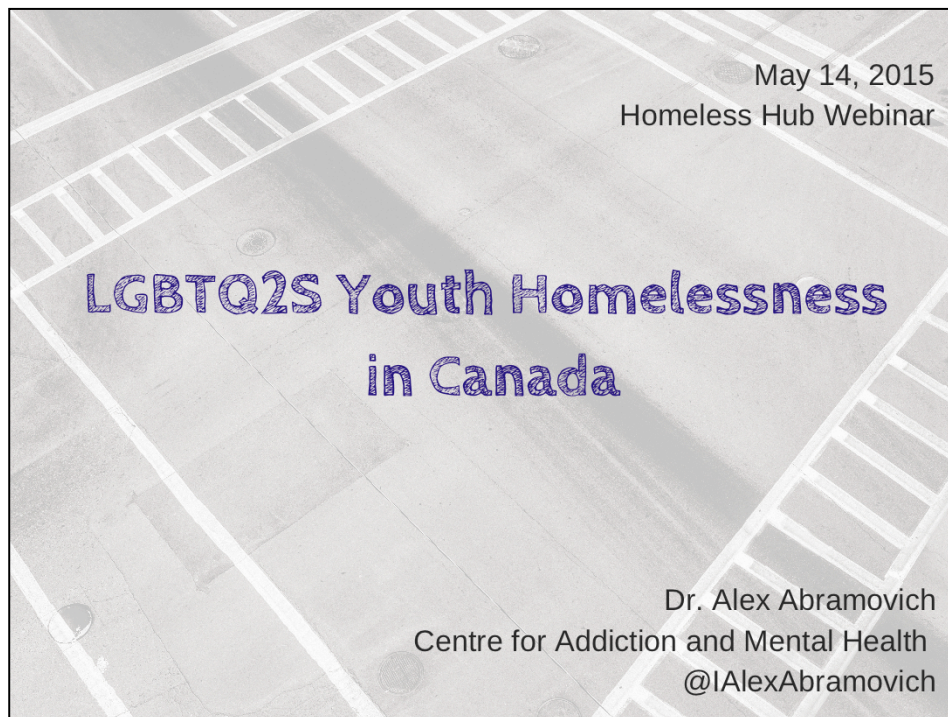


May 14, 2015



Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon.

We are both really excited to discuss this important issue with you.

This first presentation is meant to provide context and background information regarding LGBTQ youth homelessness, which is the acronym that we'll be using throughout the webinar.

I may say LGBTQ or queer and trans, I will use them interchangeably, but I'd like to acknowledge that LGBTQ does not necessarily encompass all of the different ways that people identify.

In addition to providing context and background information, my presentation will draw on my own research and other research in the area, to further explain the unique needs of the population, and I will share a bit about the work that is happening in Alberta and my involvement in the work with the Government of Alberta, as well as some key recommendations and how some of those recommendations are being put into practice.



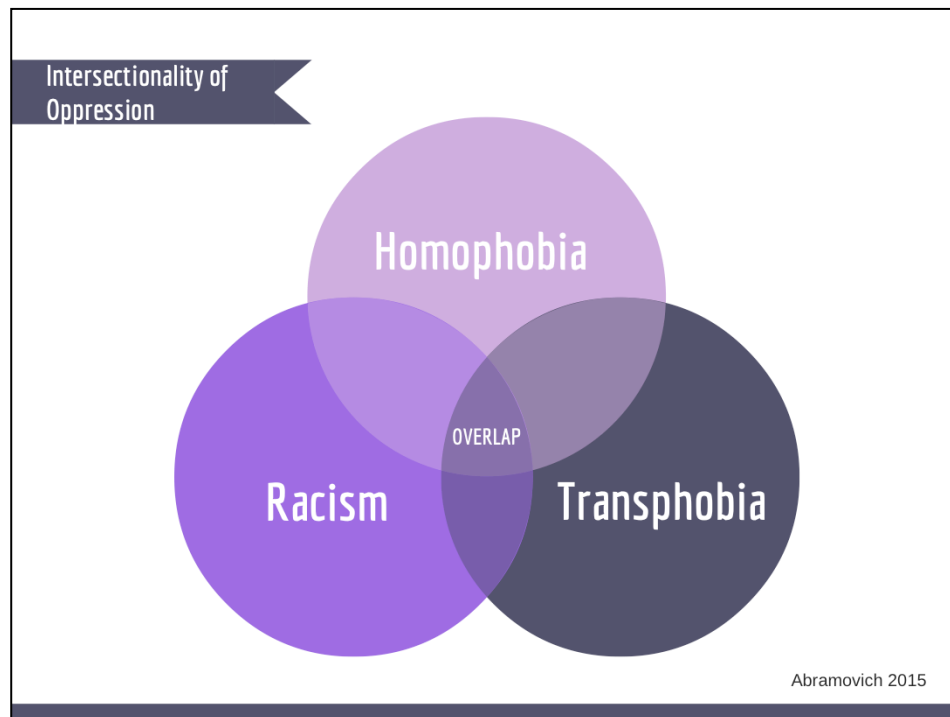
I'd like to start off with an overview and some background information and I am aware that some of you may have heard me present similar material but I think it's important that we start by naming and unpacking the problem.

We have known about queer and trans youth homelessness in Canada for over 20 yrs. now.

In 1993, one of the first studies to examine homophobia in Toronto's shelter system was conducted. The study investigated the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in group homes and shelters.

Much like the situation today, over 20 years later, the study revealed that LGB youth were unsafe in the shelter system, which resulted in youth hiding their sexual identities and rarely coming out, in order to protect their safety.

Although we have know about this issue for over 2 decades, it has taken many years for this issue to enter dialogue on youth homelessness or to receive any attention. For example, we have only very recently started to engage in serious discussions about this problem nationally.

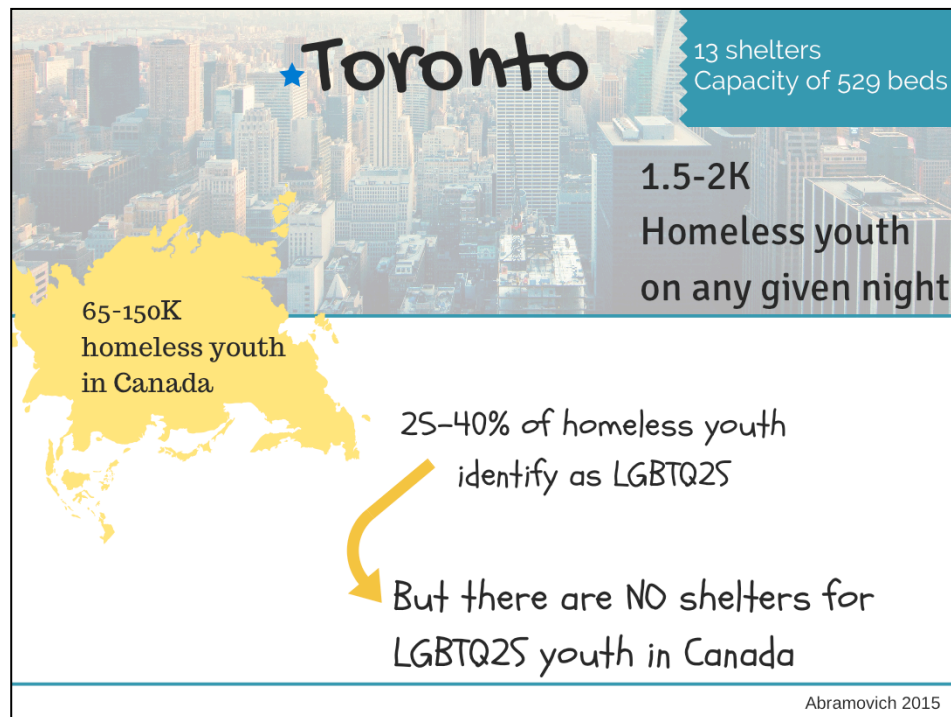


As I'm sure many of you already know, there has been extensive research on youth homelessness in Canada; however, issues regarding LGBTQ youth have rarely been the focus.

Even though studies have reported for years that these are significant issues, there is rarely any further investigation into these problems. So, there's a lot that we don't know about queer and trans youth homelessness and even less is known about the experiences of LGBTQ adults who are homeless and street-involved in Canada.

We do know that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population, but underrepresented in homeless shelters, and that trans people, especially trans women of colour, are often the most underrepresented group of people in the shelter system and the most discriminated against group of people because not only are they dealing with transphobia, but also racism, and oftentimes, homophobia as well.

Intersectionality and the issue of intersecting oppressions is very real for this population of youth, because it is such a diverse community, and youth are often oppressed on different levels. So a young gay and trans Aboriginal man may be faced with homophobia, transphobia, and racism.



While research on LGBTQ youth homelessness has expanded in recent years, there is still minimal investigation into these issues, and large-scale data collection remains limited.

It has been estimated that 25-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. However, this statistic came from 1 Canadian study 15 years ago, and there is not much clarity or understanding what this number looks like today or how we even begin to scale the problem of LGBTQ youth homelessness on a national or provincial level when services do not collect data on people's gender or sexual identities.

In 2013, the City of Toronto Street Needs Assessment included a question for the very first time about LGBTQ identity. Their results confirmed that 20% of youth in the shelter system identify as LGBTQ. Although 20% is high, we have reasons to believe that the prevalence of LGBTQ youth homelessness in Toronto is in fact even higher.

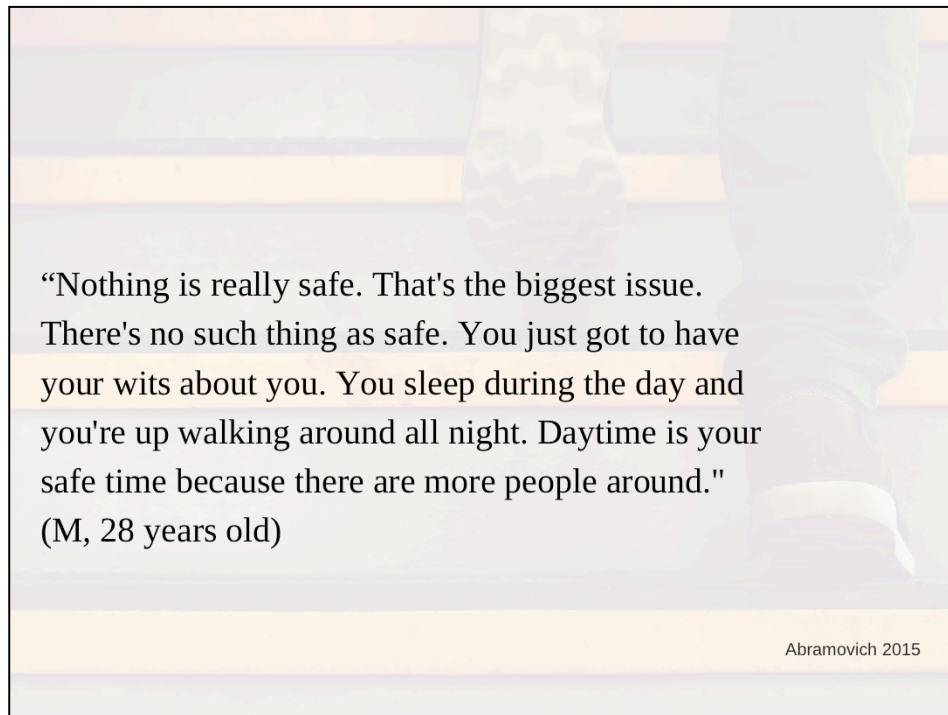
For example, many youth choose to not come out as queer or trans to volunteers conducting the survey, for a variety of reasons that often stem from issues regarding safety; and we know that countless LGBTQ youth did not have a chance to complete the survey because they are part of Toronto's hidden homeless population.

In the US, there have been a significant number of studies regarding LGBTQ youth homelessness. However, their measurements are based on a number of amalgamated regional studies, or counts conducted by local organizations that provide some idea of prevalence across the country, which also relies on older data, but more recent than here in Canada.

Point in time counts are also not necessarily collecting this type of data or if they are, there is still quite a bit of work to be done regarding training around asking specific questions concerning LGBTQ identity and making sure that every respondent is asked the same questions.

For example, making sure that every respondent is asked about gender identity, and not only the respondents that volunteers perceive as transgender or gender ambiguous.





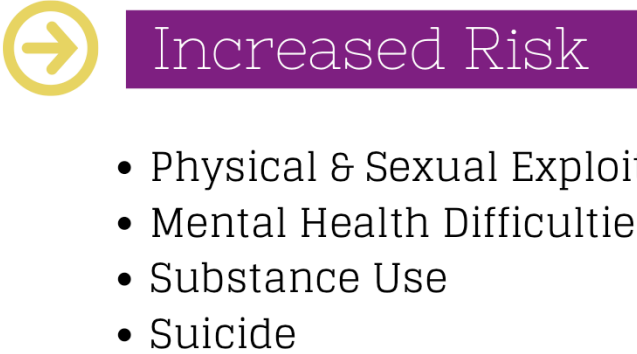
Due to these challenges LGBTQ youth often end up undercounted. A high proportion of LGBTQ homeless youth feel safer on the streets than in shelters due to homophobic and transphobic violence that occurs in the shelter system.

Although LGBTQ youth often avoid shelters and may describe the streets as safer in some situations, it is important to emphasize that the streets are not safe and sleeping outside is not safe.

LGBTQ youth especially, are at high risk of violence and discrimination. I have heard young people tell me about how they stay awake all night, to increase their safety.

Here is how one young transman, who avoided shelters due to transphobia, described sleeping rough:

*Nothing's really safe. That's the biggest issue. There's no such thing as safe. You just got to have your wits about you, you sleep during the day and you're up walking around all night. Daytime is your safe time because there are more people around. (28 years old).*



Increased Risk

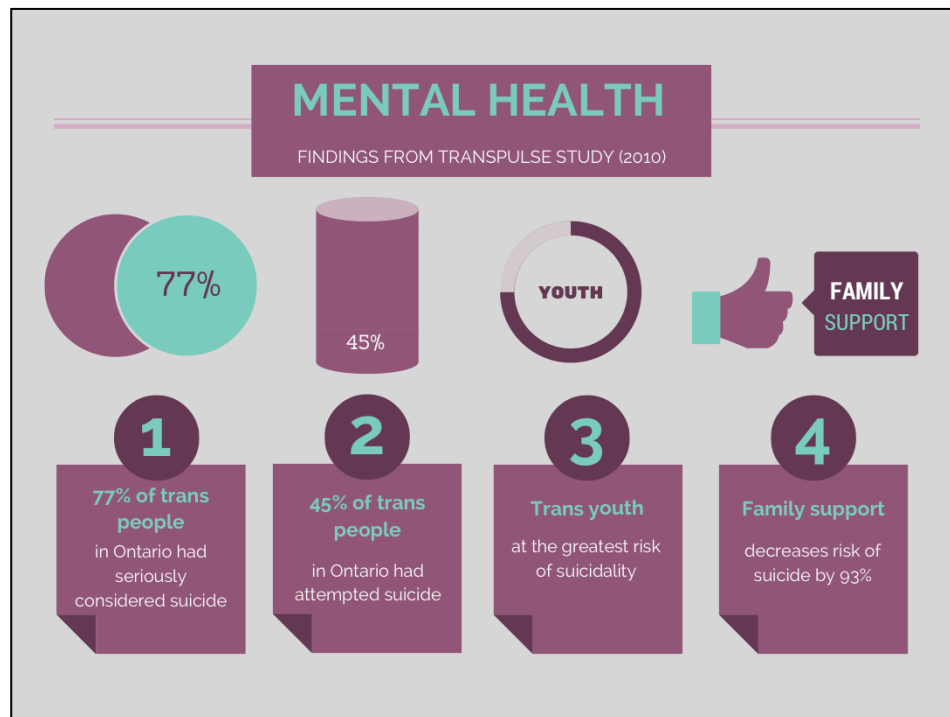
- Physical & Sexual Exploitation
- Mental Health Difficulties
- Substance Use
- Suicide

When we look at the unique needs and risks of the population --

We know that LGBTQ youth are especially vulnerable to mental health concerns, and face increased risk of physical & sexual exploitation, substance use, & suicide.

Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals experience a range of health and wellness disparities compared to their cisgender peers.

Family rejection, inadequate social services, and discrimination in housing, employment, and education make it difficult for transgender young people to secure a safe and affirming place to live.



The TransPULSE study, a large Canadian study that investigated the health needs of trans people across Ontario, found that 77% of trans people in Ontario seriously considered suicide, and that 45% had attempted suicide,

Trans youth were found to be at the greatest risk of suicidality. The early stages of transition are also when a lot of young people are kicked out of the house and trying to access support services.

It was also found that with strong family support, risk of suicide decreases by 93%. Research supports a link between lack of access to mental health care and youth homelessness.

Some of the preliminary findings of my postdoctoral work also suggest that the lack of specialized mental health services, along with the lack of specialized training for mental health practitioners contributes to institutional erasure and to LGBTQ youth avoiding mental health services altogether, even during crisis.



### Normalized Oppression

- LGBTQ2S youth sent to Toronto with false promises
- Minimal support for LGBTQ2S youth & staff in rural & remote communities
- Minimal knowledge of LGBTQ2S homeless youth experiences in rural communities

It has also come to be accepted that certain shelters are unsafe for LGBTQ youth. For example, shelters located outside of many major cities, often do not even admit LGBTQ youth because the environment is supposedly not safe for them.

As a way of responding to this, staff will send youth to the closest major city, with the false promise that they will be met with support, which is highly problematic because of the lack of support.

However, in more remote and rural communities, it is unlikely that youth are being sent to the next major city; due to the distance it takes to travel. The issues experienced by LGBTQ youth in rural communities is still an area that we have minimal knowledge about.

However, we do know that services in rural communities often feel isolated when it comes to providing support to LGBTQ youth and that there are minimal specialized services for LGBTQ youth in rural communities, leaving them with few places to go for support around coming out, transitioning, and trans health.



LGBTQ youth often describe shelters and housing programs as dangerous places due to widespread homophobic and transphobic discrimination that is rarely dealt with or addressed.

LGBTQ cultural competency training is rarely offered or made mandatory for staff working at shelters and youth serving organizations across the country.

Due to minimal training and awareness, there tends to be a lack of knowledge and ignorance towards LGBTQ youth. Especially with regards to language and terminology.

For example, the lack of training can make it difficult for staff to intervene in situations of homophobia and transphobia. They may not understand the importance of stepping in when they hear homophobic and transphobic slurs. I have heard staff refer to this type of language as a part of youth culture that cannot be changed.

I have also heard staff suggest that homophobia and transphobia do not actually occur, but are rather used as an excuse or as a way for LGBTQ youth to protect themselves during a fight.





Trans youth face more discrimination than any other youth group and therefore often avoid the shelters altogether. Even though shelters are supposed to be accessible to trans and two-spirit residents, in their self-defined gender; unfortunately, we know that this is not always the case.

Trans and gender non-conforming youth are often rejected by shelters based on their gender identity and are regularly not permitted to access the shelter that matches the gender with which they identify because shelters often do not feel equipped to support trans youth. This forces trans youth to stay in a shelter that is not consistent with their gender identity, or to avoid the shelter system altogether.

Part of the reason that the shelter system is not accessible to trans and gender non-conforming individuals, is because shelters are often segregated by Male and Female floors, which have Male and Female bathrooms and showers. The floor that a person will be placed on has more to do with the staff's perception of a person's sex and less to do with how an individual actually identifies. This is highly problematic because not all individuals' gender identity is congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth and not all individuals fit into the gender binary. For example, if someone presents as more gender ambiguous, then whatever the staff member perceives their sex to be, is what floor they will be placed on. This creates significant barriers to access for genderqueer and gender non-conforming individuals, and individuals who are in the early stages of their transition.

Trans youth have needs that are distinct from those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, for example, they may need transition related health care, including access to hormones or surgery, or help getting ID and legal name change sorted out.



For those of you who have heard me present before, will know that I speak about institutional erasure and about the ways that institutions such as the shelter system, erase LGBTQ people.

For example, institutional rules and policies that do not consider trans people end up erasing trans people from existence.

Earlier I spoke about some of the challenges in accurately measuring LGBTQ youth homelessness, another major challenge, is that key forms often do not include transgender people.

An example that I tend to use, is intake forms, during the intake process, when forms only provide the option for people to identify as “male” or “female”, any identity that does not fall into those 2 fixed categories are not included, so for example, if someone identifies as genderqueer, meaning that they do not identify as female or male, they are not included, and if they are not included and not counted in key forms, programs, reports, and statistics.

When shelters are not equipped to deal with transphobia, when shelters do not provide people with the basic human right of using the bathroom, for example there are typically only men’s and women’s bathrooms, and rarely gender neutral bathrooms, these are the types of things that make people feel like they do not belong, and when people feel like they do not belong, then they avoid services.

## **Changing our approach to youth homelessness**

- Cross government approach
- Strategies that focus on longer term solutions
- Focus on helping youth find and keep housing
- Prioritizing youth

This of course is a very complex and multifaceted issue, which requires a cross-government approach.

Ultimately, this involves changing the way that we approach youth homelessness, which is something that Dr. Stephen Gaetz addresses quite powerfully in his work.

In Canada, our response to homelessness is primarily focused on implementing strategies that make homelessness less visible, rather than actually solving homelessness.

A great deal of the money spent on homelessness in Canada is spent on the emergency response, which includes emergency shelters and drop-ins.

While the emergency response is necessary and important, especially for LGBTQ youth who have been kicked out or forced to leave home and are in crisis, we need strategies that will also focus on longer-term solutions and on helping young people find and keep housing.



For example, the Government of Alberta's Youth Plan, I'm not sure how many of you have read the Youth Plan, but I highly recommend it!

The Youth Plan prioritizes subpopulations of youth, such as *Aboriginal youth and LGBTQ youth*, which is how I got involved in the work in Alberta.

I am currently working with the Government of Alberta to develop a strategy to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth across the province of Alberta.

We knew from the start that this work needed to be grounded in research, community led, integrated throughout the youth plan, and of course rural and urban in focus.

This strategy includes short term, medium term, and long term solutions, which will be implemented by youth serving organizations across the province and will help ensure that the population is served more appropriately.




We have already set up a provincial Alberta LGBTQ working group, with representation from most parts of the province. We have a meeting once a month. This group is helping with identifying needs and barriers, as well as sharing information and resources.

It is also a great opportunity for interagency collaboration and for building partnerships across the province.

This is an excellent example of how we could be dealing with the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness from province to province.





## Prevention Strategies

- ✔ Preventing LGBTQ2S youth from becoming homeless may not be possible, therefore, we need to shift our thinking from traditional “prevention”
- ✔ More emphasis on preventing LGBTQ youth from becoming adults experiencing chronic homelessness
- ✔ Working collaboratively across systems

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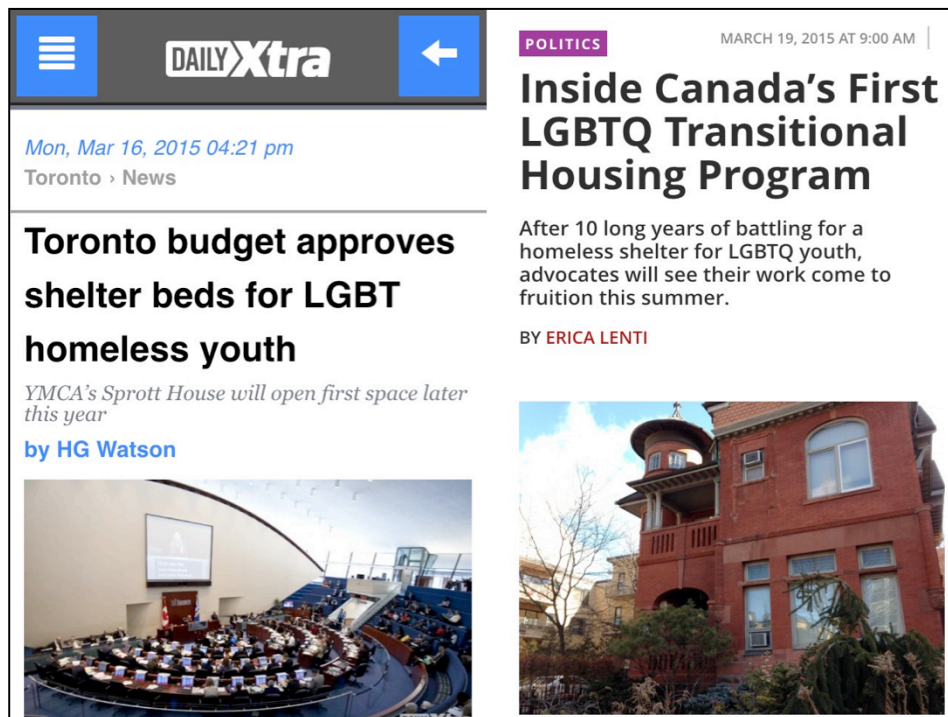
When we look at traditional prevention strategies they typically focus on strategies to keep youth from becoming homeless in the first place.

However, from the numerous youth that I have spoken to, I have heard many stories about young people's lives being threatened by their parents, which is why family reunification is sometimes not an option for this population of young people.

It may not always be possible to prevent LGBTQ youth from becoming homeless, which is why we need to shift our thinking from traditional “prevention” and place more emphasis on preventing LGBTQ youth from becoming adults experiencing chronic homelessness; this can be done by working collaboratively across systems, through a cross systems approach.

Caitlyn Ryan, at San Francisco State U, developed the Family Acceptance Project, which is an evidence-based approach to decrease risk and promote well-being in the context of LGBTQ youth and families. Because although reuniting youth with their parents is often not possible, there tends to be at least one family member who is supportive. So, we need to make sure we help youth reunite with those family members.

A comprehensive approach that involves various initiatives is necessary in developing a prevention strategy for this population of youth, as well as continuing to collect data on LGBTQ identity and pathways to homelessness, because if we learn more about the primary causes and risks, we can better address prevention strategies.



Research has continuously supported the creation of LGBTQ specific housing options across the country, which is something that has been hugely successful in the US.

Here in Toronto, City Council recently approved funding for 2 LGBTQ transitional housing programs, which has provided a unique opportunity for us to evaluate these new programs and will allow for future LGBTQ housing services across the province, or even across the country, to operate from an evidence-based model.

Based on some of the promising practices - we know that in order to address this issue, shelters and youth serving organizations need to engage the young people who are affected most by these issues, in the development of programs, and that transparency and accountability and community partnerships are key.

We also know that the development of a standardized model of care that promotes an accepting, affirming & supportive environment is crucial.

May 14, 2015



Some examples of what this involves, include;

Mandatory LGBTQ cultural competency training for all staff, which is about to officially become mandatory for all shelter staff here in Toronto – on the slide there are some photos of the day that City Council voted in favour of mandatory LGBTQ cultural competency training, including a photo of Teal and myself at City Hall. Teal was the Youth Engagement Worker for the Toolkit.

Such a model would also include, inclusive intake forms, close consideration of the physical environment of services (so for example, private & semi-private rooms with washrooms increase access by improving safety).

Shelters and support services need to be equipped with appropriate resources, learning tools, and posters on the walls, such as information about coming out as LGBTQ, and information about sexual and gender identity, so that queer and trans youth see themselves reflected in all aspects of programs, from the intake forms, to the messages on the walls, to the fliers in the lobby.



It has taken many years to convince key decision makers to take action.

I know that there are still many communities across the country that feel isolated and are uncertain how to support LGBTQ youth accessing services.

Which is a large reason that the Toolkit was developed and will hopefully be helpful to you.

I want to thank the Learning Community, Eva's Initiatives, and of course my fabulous colleague Lesley, for all of your hard work on the Toolkit and for bringing this incredibly important resource together. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to the Toolkit.

I'm sure that I say this on behalf of everyone involved, it's amazing to finally share this with you all!

Now Lesley will take it away and tell you more about the Toolkit.

May 14, 2015

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Thank you!