

7.1 LEAP INTO ACTION: PREPARING LGBTQ2S YOUTH FOR THE WORKFORCE

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Introduction

Youth who are experiencing homelessness face increased barriers to employment as a direct result of unstable housing. Young people experiencing homelessness may be living in a constant state of distress and fear. This stress affects their ability to put energy toward anything other than searching for housing, as shelter and security are an immediate concern. If youth seek housing through a shelter or non-profit, they are often required to go through the time-consuming process of securing a bed, which often involves several steps, and the bed may not be guaranteed for more than one night. This leaves little time and even less mental and emotional energy to search for jobs.

Unstable housing, lack of a permanent address, and homelessness make it challenging for young people to maintain reliable contact information (phone number, email address, mailing address), which can affect their ability to apply for jobs, contact employers, and receive and respond to interview requests. These circumstances also make it difficult for young people to access facilities such as showers, laundromats and pharmacies. This can affect their ability to maintain optimal hygiene and acquire and preserve professional attire. Youth experiencing homelessness also face challenges accessing and maintaining possession of documentation necessary for employment. Frequent moving, theft, family estrangement and limited space for carrying supplies can make it hard for youth to find and carry their identification (ID), including birth certificate, social security card and other necessary paperwork.

Experiencing homelessness affects a young person's financial stability. Youth without permanent addresses or IDs struggle to open bank accounts, and unexpected housing loss can result in overdrafts, missed payments and debt accrual. Young people often struggle to afford transportation, and unreliable transportation make it hard for them to attend interviews or arrive to work on time.

LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness face increased barriers in the professional world, resulting from homophobia, transphobia, ageism and racism (Abramovich, 2016). Additional barriers to obtaining employment include challenges with government-issued identification. Even if a young person's documents are accessible, they may not accurately reflect their name and gender, which causes complications when applying for jobs and completing official forms. LGBTQ2S youth can struggle with the conservative requirements of business attire, which promotes a rigid gender binary, and they can face homophobia and transphobia in many different aspects of the workplace. Access to bathrooms, interactions with co-workers and customers, and un-affirming or even intolerant workplace environments all add additional challenges for young people. Daily occurrences of homophobia and transphobia make it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully perform one's job. In addition to employment challenges related to housing instability, LGBTQ2S youth may experience discrimination during the hiring process or on the job. This is especially true for transgender and gender-expansive youth. According to the United States (U.S.) Transgender Discrimination Survey (James et al., 2016), only 19% of the 27,715 survey respondents reported being employed in the year prior to the survey and 30% of those respondents reported being fired, denied promotion, or experiencing gender-identity-related mistreatment on the job. Additionally, 77% of those who had been employed in the year prior to the survey reported doing things to avoid being mistreated on the job, like hiding their gender, delaying gender transition or quitting their job (James et al., 2016).

The LEAP Program

The New York City LGBT Community Center (The Center) and the Ali Forney Center (AFC), a provider of housing and supportive services for LGBTQ2S youth in New York City, collaborate on creating and executing a comprehensive work-readiness curriculum called LEAP (Learning, Education, Advancement and Placement). LEAP offers wraparound support with measures geared toward life skills, education and employment for LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness. Our organizations have operated this program together since 2013. We have established a solid foundation for providing employment-related services to the community. The approach is client-centred and designed at a literacy and developmental level that is suitable for each young person. For example, because many of our youth are interested in fashion, entertainment and other creative and artistic fields, our partnerships with businesses and post-secondary entities in

the community match those passions and interests. These partnerships include the clothing companies H&M, Banana Republic, GAP and Old Navy, and educational entities Parsons School of Fashion, Fashion Institute Technology and many others.

The Center's Youth Program provides LEAP participants with a meaningful internship experience. LEAP participants are also able to join in the Center's youth programming, designed to build leadership and social awareness for all LGBTQ2S youth. Through a partnership with AFC, young people are provided work experience opportunities—paid and unpaid—which are crucial for young people to acquire job skills and build their resumes. As part of this program, The Center Internship and Career Developer is on site at AFC to co-facilitate workshops with AFC staff members. These workshops are part of a six-week career readiness training curriculum for youth engaged in our meaningful work program to help identify the interests and skills of each youth participant. Each cycle will host 15 to 20 LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, with the goal of reaching at least 150 youth per year.

The Center's Internship and Career Developer gets to know each youth participant and their goals, and then identifies internship opportunities. In addition, the Career Developer concurrently identifies and interviews potential employers to determine their level of LGBTQ2S cultural competency, identifies potential supervisors, and obtains a signed agreement regarding an internship supervision plan outlining the responsibilities and expectations of the young person and the site supervisor. The Career Developer also provides individual weekly support to each participating youth, follow-up engagement with employers to ensure internships are running successfully, addresses any issues or problems that arise during internships and works with employers to complete post-internship evaluations about the employers' experiences with youth from our program. Youth who complete the four weeks of training must also pass the National Work Readiness Assessment and receive the National Work Readiness Credential. The assessment measures the foundational skills of value-creating relationships and uses real-life scenarios in four different modules: situational judgement, oral language, read with understanding and use math to solve problems. This credential demonstrates to potential employers that young people are more prepared for the work world. Participants also complete a placement assessment meeting with The Center Internship and Career Developer or their AFC counterpart. Youth are then placed in an external internship placement with one of our prescreened employers. These internships last between four and six weeks, offering 80 to 84 hours of meaningful work.

Dedicated support services are offered to youth who wish to pursue formal high school education, and they are referred to Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) and High School Equivalency (HSE) programs that fit their individualized needs. Bi-weekly fieldtrips to open houses at potential programs encourage clients to explore their educational options. Volunteer mentors also play a role and offer young people one-on-one tutoring and engagement to help them prepare for the TASC and reach their educational goals.

LEAP is funded through the New York State Department of Labor. Additionally, donations from Time Warner Cable enable life skills workshops to be offered on site at the AFC Drop In Center's state-of-the-art Career and Educational Learning Lab. The life skills curriculum is offered through support groups, volunteer life skills mentors, one-on-one training with staff and through our corporate partners. The training is divided into two core components: 1) Soft Skills, which focuses on goal-setting, professional communication, problem-solving, understanding/mitigating stress and time management; and 2) Hard Skills, which addresses topics like resume- and cover-letter-building, email and phone communication, workplace math, workplace computer technologies, and other professional skills.

Starting a Program Like LEAP

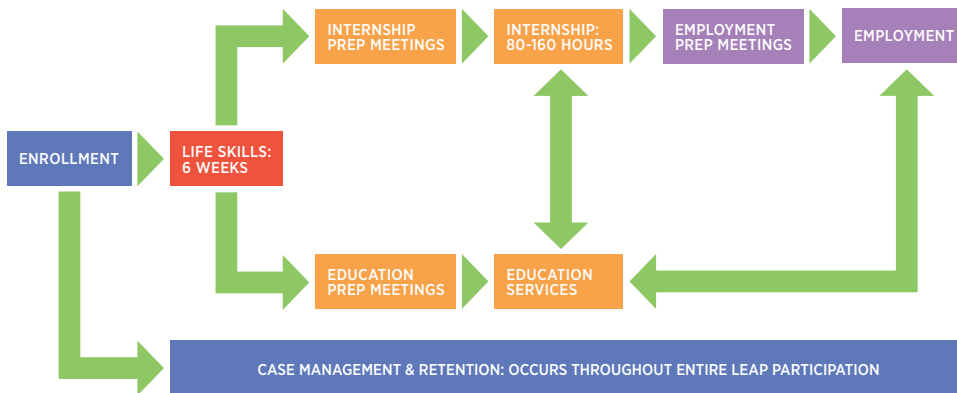
We think the LEAP program is a good model of providing holistic job training opportunities and supports for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. Here are the basics of how and why we do what we do:

- The LEAP program offers a four-pronged approach to job development, while also offering holistic housing services. This holistic approach is critical to success for LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness. Our program works with these youth who are between the ages of 18 and 24, and are disconnected from employment, education and housing. In order to help them succeed, the program offers stabilization in the form of housing, case management, counselling, physical and mental health care, and peer-to-peer support. Once young people feel independent and secure that their basic needs will be met, they can begin to engage in career-readiness training and the development of career-readiness goals. It is difficult to think about career goals when one isn't sure where one will sleep.

- The LEAP program includes a Life Skills component, which aims to provide LEAPers with the foundational knowledge necessary to secure and sustain employment and live independently. A main draw to the program is that its goal is to help young people become financially independent. Aside from housing and supportive services, the LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness that we work with are looking for ways to obtain and maintain employment. The Life Skills programming meets each youth where they are; we work with each young person to identify what their needs are, and make an individualized plan for how their needs will be met. Examples of skills taught include resume-writing, budgeting and developing a three-minute pitch about one's skills. The goal of the program is not to connect youth to low-paying jobs that offer little to no opportunity for advancement, but to work with them to identify possible careers that will provide long-term employment that will enable individual young people to sustain themselves financially.
- The Education/Vocation component provides LEAPers with trainings, certification opportunities and support seeking high school diplomas, HSE, and college degrees. Additional certifications and educational opportunities help reach the goals of identifying achievable career paths, and obtaining and maintaining sustainable employment in a competitive market.
- The Internship portion provides LEAPers with a paid and meaningful work experience in a field related to their long-term career goals. Meaningful work experiences that are connected to young people's career goals are a critical part of the program. In addition to building their resumes, these internships enable young people to put the skills they've learned into practice and to test out careers in the professional area they've identified, in a supportive environment. Internships also allow us to engage with the community. We build partnerships with local businesses that are close in proximity to the program sites. We bring local businesses into the programs to introduce them to our programs and to the young people. Bridging the gap between community organizations and local businesses is a necessary step in creating job opportunities for LGBTQ2S youth.
- The Employment portion of LEAP involves career exploration opportunities and connections to open positions with partner companies. Ideally, young people will be hired by the business where they served their internship after their internship is completed. This is not always possible. When career goals are identified, program staff connect with local business partners to see if there are open positions matching the young person's skills and interests. If a young person decides a specific career is not the right path for them, they can create a new individualized plan.

- LEAPers also receive ongoing support once they have a job. LEAPers have at least three months follow-up once they obtain a job. This follow-up is meant to help support their success on the job. Program staff make sure LEAPers are doing what they need to do to maintain employment, that they are maintaining their daily needs (e.g., child care, health appointments), communicating with their employer and going to work on time. Staff support the young people around any problems that arise during their first few months on the job.

Program Successes and Challenges



As different challenges arise for program participants, the LEAP team responds. The following example demonstrates how the LEAP team continues to learn from and respond to the needs of LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness as they work with the program and navigate professional environments.

G, age 23, enrolled in LEAP while living in AFC housing. They excelled in the life skills courses and sought an internship that would enhance their existing skills in design, marketing and fashion, and help launch their own career in fashion. LEAP was able to partner with a fashion styling company, and G was offered an internship as a fashion assistant. LEAP provided \$10/hour compensation, a weekly transit pass and professional attire as needed. AFC continued to provide G with housing, access to meals, case management and healthcare. When G was struggling to communicate with their supervisor because they did not have a phone, the fashion company and LEAP were able to work together to create a system to support G and enable them to continue the internship. This also compelled LEAP to begin providing LEAPers with temporary cell phones

during their internships to ensure they were able to communicate effectively and maintain their position. G completed their internship and graduated from the LEAP program successfully. After their graduation, the fashion company was so impressed with their work that they offered them a permanent position with their company. G now works as a paid assistant for the company.

LEAP has celebrated the successes of many program participants. One thing that works well about the program is the ability we have to provide internship opportunities for LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness within their service provider organization. For example, the following scenario describes a culinary internship that exists at the AFC drop in center.

L, age 23, was living in a family shelter and enrolled in LEAP to gain job experience. She was a dedicated participant and completed the life skills portion quickly. L was interested in a career in the food industry and applied for a position in the Culinary Internship offered in the kitchen at AFC. This internship provides practical culinary experience and prepares interns for taking their food handler's license exam. L excelled at this internship and impressed her supervisor so much that she was offered a long-term position in the kitchen. While working in the kitchen and receiving mentorship from both LEAP staff and her internship supervisor, L decided to pursue her HSE diploma. She worked with LEAP staff to connect to an HSE program and enroll in classes. L continues to work in the AFC kitchen and pursue her HSE.

Conclusion

LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness need specialized employment supports and a unique combination of wrap-around services. These youth face the challenges of experiencing homelessness compounded by widespread discrimination and harassment in the job market. These barriers disproportionately affect transgender and gender-expansive youth. While experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ2S young people may have few available resources and little energy to focus on education and employment, especially if they do not know where they will sleep or when they will be able to eat. LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness may also need additional supports identifying potential careers and accessing credentialing programs or the education they need in order to move forward in their identified profession.

The LEAP program addresses these issues through our collaboration, which includes a housing provider and a supportive services provider. This collaboration allows for a holistic program that centres the basic needs of LGBTQ2S youth, provides wrap-around supports and stabilization, and then engages them in career readiness training and the identification of career goals. Our program works to connect youth to careers, rather than just jobs. We want young people to obtain and maintain employment that will earn them a living wage, feel meaningful, and eventually lead to financial independence. LEAP staff spend time exploring career opportunities with young people and making individualized plans for how they can reach their professional goals. Our partnerships with local businesses create internship placements and job opportunities where young people can gain skills and obtain meaningful work experiences.

Anyone wanting to start a successful employment program for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness must recognize that this process takes time, and a successful program must include a wide range of services to address the unique and varied needs of the youth with which the program will work. Programs must be prepared to address the basic survival needs, educational and vocational goals, career readiness preparation and ongoing employment support of each young person in their program. They must also connect with local businesses in their community to build a wide range of educational and vocational opportunities to offer participants. When adequately supported, LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness can be successful in the job market and can find meaningful and sustainable careers.

References

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About the Authors

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Natasha Jones began her employment at The Center as a Youth Program Coordinator in May 2010 before becoming the Director of Youth Leadership and Engagement. She has served as a liaison between several community based organizations and the NYC Department of Education to provide children and families with support and guidance. At Center Youth, Natasha provides supervision to staff overseeing our Peer Leadership Internship programming and continues to support young people in their educational and career goals, artistic creativity and development of their whole selves.

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Michelle Dugan is the Career Developer for the youth program at the LGBT Center. She partners with the Ali Forney Center to provide career development workshops, individualized support, and internship opportunities for youth in the LEAP program. Michelle also works at the New York Foundling providing educational support to youth in foster care. Before this, Michelle co-facilitated the Career Training Program at Green Chimneys, which provided services for LGBT homeless, runaway, and foster care youth.

