

Serving Specific Populations

LGBTQI2-S

There are not many publications on specific issues related to LGBTQI2-S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersexed, and two-spirited) individuals experiencing homelessness. An overview of relevant topics is below to help raise awareness and to assist care providers in their work.

Terminology

First, a word about language. The self-identifying terms in the community expanded significantly over the past few years. Some adults historically self-identified primarily within the terms of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. Many adults and young persons from minority communities do not accept these terms for self-identification. Young persons in general use a greater variety of terms for self-identification.

For the sake of discussion, we use the term LGBTQI2-S here to reference individuals who live with a sexual orientation, sexual preference, partner preference, or gender orientation that is alternative to the mainstream population. Though we admit it is not all-embracing, this acronym largely reflects the current terminology used in the community.

- **Lesbian**—term for women who partner with women
- **Gay**—general term for same-sex partner preference
- **Bisexual**—term for persons who have the capacity to love and partner with the same sex or the opposite sex; however, this term does not imply that they are not monogamous in their relationships
- **Transgender**—an over-generalized term used for people who do not experience their gender as the sex assigned to them at birth
- **Questioning**—the Q in this acronym historically indicated “queer”; however, many consider this term largely derogatory and dropped it from the self-identification terminology—the Q more often refers to the sizeable population of mostly young persons exploring their options in their partner preference
- **Intersexed**—this term refers to persons born with sexual attributes of both male and female genders
- **Two-spirited**—is a term for third gender people (for example, woman-living-man) that are among many American Indian and Canadian First Nations indigenous groups. It usually implies a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body. Some contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, same-sex attracted and intersex Native Americans also use the term to describe themselves. There are many indigenous terms for these individuals in the various Native American languages.

Do not assume

It is helpful to be familiar with the terminology used; however, it is never safe to assume that a person self-identifies within these terms. It is important that care providers use gender- and partner-neutral language at the beginning of a helping relationship. Once the door opens that gender

identification or partner preference is significant, ask individuals how they define what they experience, and how they wish to identify, if at all.

Respect for culture

Culture and group are also significant. For example, some African American and Latino groups do not use or recognize gay terminology as an acceptable means of identification. Using these terms may be offensive. Persons from Native American backgrounds may use the term two-spirit to self-identify. This term has a rich history in their traditions.

Stay informed

No attempt at providing a comprehensive list of terms used by these subgroups would sustain over any period, as the terminology changes rapidly. Such a list would be out of date upon publication and would certainly overlook groups and preferences. The “LGBTQI2-S community” does not have one culture of their own, but is a microcosm of the many cultures that exist everywhere.

To increase your knowledge in working with a particular individual’s group or to increase your sensitivity in a particular area, seek out some resources. There are many useful resources on the web about most any existing sub-group. A good place to start is the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s site at <http://www.thetaskforce.org/>. Local “gay” bookstores may also have good resources, but be aware that the bookstore may focus on the clientele it serves, and it may not have comprehensive information. In larger urban areas, there may be advocacy organizations for the broader “gay” community and for some of the culturally specific sub-groups. Typically, their mission is to raise awareness and provide support, so they would likely welcome your attempt to obtain information.

Finally, be true to yourself. If you have the capacity to be non-judgmental, supportive, and resourceful, that is commendable. However, if you are not sure you can practice in this manner, be honest, and refer the person or family to someone who can. There is no shame in admitting your own biases; in fact, there is great strength in persons who can be honest about them.

Navigating homeless services

Regardless of the unique aspects a person presents, the key in successful service delivery is to be able to assist people in navigating survival services, health services, mental health and addiction services, and other resources that are accepting and non-judgmental. Experiencing homelessness is harmful enough to a person’s sense of self-worth.

Decreasing the incidence of re-traumatization by providing safe referrals and resources is a gift easily given through diligence and compassion. Below are some examples of the barriers and challenges LGBTQI2-S families, adults, and youth frequently encounter.

Families

Shelter and housing programs

Families with same-sex parents can face enormous barriers in accessing shelter and housing programs. In many programs, the two parents will have to separate, as the family shelter system is

slow in responding to the recognition of alternative family composition. This separation is extremely disruptive and adds significant stress on families already having economic difficulties. As a result, families may opt to find their own accommodations by staying in hotels, vehicles, campgrounds, or with friends.

The opportunity to assist families with same-sex parents in regaining housing stability may be much more difficult as they spend more time in unstable living accommodations, experienced long periods of stress, and faced discrimination in accessing resources. In addition, the shelter and housing system is heavily dependent on the faith-based and non-profit service system. These systems may have moral and religious interpretations of the family unit that may pose additional barriers to accessing assistance.

Services

Same-sex parent families have additional barriers to accessing services. Heterosexual parents have equal opportunity to access services for their children and for the family as a whole. Most states only consider one parent in same-sex parent households eligible to communicate with service providers and the schools. This can create chaos when there is no opportunity to share the burden and the responsibility. Same-sex parents with housing may establish an effective and safe system to deal with this reality through a relationship with the school system, their primary care physician, and other support networks. However, once displaced from this carefully coordinated support system, it is very difficult to replicate.

Single adults

Shelter and housing programs

The single LGBTQI2-S adults who have the most difficulty with the shelter and housing system are those who are transgendered or intersexed. Shelter and congregate housing programs typically separate into male and female. For the transgendered or intersexed individual, this separation can be a traumatic experience. We include “Making Shelters Safe for Transgender People” from the National Center for Transgender Equality in this guide. The concepts of safety for gender neutrality in this guide are also pertinent to intersexed persons.

Services

In seeking services, many persons will not self-disclose that they are LGBTQI2-S if they believe that going “back in the closet” will reduce discrimination and is the safest way for self-preservation. For some, this strategy is effective. However, there is a diminishment of sense of self and it carries some additional risks. If someone is “outed,” it may put that person in danger of verbal or physical abuse depending on the circumstances. Making the decision of how to navigate these barriers is a difficult and personal decision. Service providers need to take great care not to “out” individuals and should assist them in establishing a safety plan while working on safer resources to access.

Youth and young adults

In working with LGBTQI2-S youth experiencing homelessness, it is imperative that the worker understands that the homeless services, social services, and juvenile justice systems did not

necessarily provide them with safe options in the past, and that oftentimes these youth struggle with the notion that there is no safe place for them to turn.

Assisting this group requires great care in assessing their options and ensuring that referrals are safe. Youth in general can show great resilience in the face of adversity. Although workers should nurture this trait, it is also critical not to overlook their fears, history of abuse, and potentially their deficits in practicing effective survival skills.

A history of institutionalization through foster care, residential treatment programs, and the juvenile justice system likely did not provide youth with skills for independent living. Resources that are available to them to learn these skills may be part of the social services system. These youth may not want to access these systems again for fear of re-institutionalization.

It is important to know how the laws in your state affect the services offered to youth. In many states, homelessness before the age of 18, before official emancipation, or while in the custody of social services is a crime. It may be a requirement that programs have to turn these youth over to the juvenile justice system when they seek help. Further information on laws related to emancipation and unaccompanied youth is available at The Juvenile Law Center www.jlc.org.

The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless issued a comprehensive document on homelessness and GLBT youth in 2006. What follows is some excerpted information from this document for your review. We strongly encourage accessing and reading the document in full. This document is available at http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/homeless_youth.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness

Statistics:

- Approximately 20% to 40% of youth who become homeless identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender
- There is a disproportionate representation of LGBT youth in the homeless population
- Approximately 26% had their families kick them out of their homes when they “came out”
- More than 30% of homeless or foster-care youth experienced a violent physical assault when they “came out”
- Youth may leave their housing or shelter situation because they actually feel safer on the streets

Mental Health Issues:

- The compounded effects of double discrimination make LGBT youth experiencing homelessness especially vulnerable to mental health problems

Substance Use:

- The risk of substance use increases due to the combination of stressors that LGBT homeless youth face

Risky Sexual Behavior:

- Although a last resort, LGBT youth are at risk of participating in survival sex

Victimization of LGBT Youth Experiencing Homelessness:

- These youth face the threat of victimization everywhere: at home; at school; at their jobs; and, for those who are out-of-home, at shelters and on the streets
- Those LGBT youth living on the streets are significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime

Information excerpted and adapted from: Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Making Shelters Safe for Transgender People

Transgender people identify as or express a gender that is different from their sex at birth. This group includes people born male but living as female, or vice versa, and also people who are androgynous. All transgender people are at significant risk of harassment and physical or sexual assault by people who do not understand, are fearful of, or do not approve of transgender people.

There is a disproportionate representation of transgender people in the homeless population. Homeless shelters must be safe, respectful places for transgender individuals because they may have nowhere else to go. It is not difficult to ensure safe shelter for transgender people. Here are some guidelines:

Respect a person's self-identification as male or female.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, if someone identifies herself as a woman, treat her as a woman in all circumstances, regardless of whether she was male at birth and regardless of whether she had sex reassignment surgery. Recognize and respect a person's stated identity, and shelter staff/volunteers should use the name and pronoun ("he" or "she") that the person prefers. If you do not know what terms to use, ask politely.

Understand that people may not have updated identification.

Respect and use the gender and name a person provides, regardless of the name and gender listed on one's documents.

Respect a person's evaluation of what housing options are safe or unsafe for that person.

Allow transgender people to choose the housing option that they believe is the safest for them. Generally, if shelters are sex-segregated, house people who identify as men with men, and people who identify as women with women. This policy is true regardless of whether people have identification showing this name/gender, regardless of whether they look masculine or feminine, and regardless of whether they had sex reassignment surgery. Shelters should also offer transgender residents the ability to sleep within eyesight/earshot of the night staff to lower the risk of assault and harassment.

Respond to inappropriate behavior or harassment by any person.

Do not tolerate harassment of any person, including a transgender person. Do not base policies or rules on untrue stereotypes about transgender people. It is not fair or correct to assume that just because people are transgender or have male genitals, they are a physical threat to others. Enforce/make rules based only on inappropriate behaviors.

Ensure safe bathroom and shower options.

Transgender people should be welcome to use bathrooms and showers that correspond to their self-identified gender or the facilities that feel safest for them. Other people's discomfort is not a valid reason to deny a transgender person access to facilities. If possible, make gender-neutral bathrooms available. It may be necessary to add a stall door or shower curtain to address valid privacy and safety concerns.

Understand that transgender people may not "look like" the people they feel they are.

Transgender persons experiencing homelessness may not have access to personal toiletries, clothing, make-up, shaving supplies, and all of the other items they typically use to groom. For example, a transgender woman (born male) may be unable to shave facial hair without her toiletries. This lack of access does not mean anyone should treat her with disrespect or not see her as a woman.

Keep a person's transgender status confidential, unless he or she tells you otherwise.

This confidentiality minimizes the risk of discrimination and violence. Handle transgender status in the same manner as other personal health information.

For a more complete publication devoted to making all shelters safe for transgender people, see “Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People.” This document is available at

<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/TransitioningOurShelters.pdf>.

Adapted from: National Center for Transgender Equality. *Making shelters safe for transgender evacuees*. Retrieved from <http://www.nctequality.org/Resources/evacuationShelters.pdf>