



Creating a Safe, Affirming Environment for LGBTQ Youth in Transitional Living Programs (TLPs)





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These recommendations are drawn from a multicity project conducted to understand the unique challenges of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. Part of a larger initiative, *3/40 Blueprint: Creating the Blueprint to Reduce LGBTQ Youth Homelessness*, this summary describes how youth conceptualize a safe and affirming environment and how providers create safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth.

Key Findings: Youth Views of Safety and Affirmation

Safety is one of our most basic needs—if youth don't feel safe in a residence, it is extremely difficult to complete developmental tasks such as pursuing education, securing meaningful employment, engaging in healthy romantic relationships, developing a cohesive support network, and continuing identity development. Youth identified safety as key to an affirming environment, as well as acknowledgement and validation of diverse identities, and the value of physical and emotional space to express those identities across social contexts.

Physical safety must be attended to as a primary need, and can be supported in a number of ways including:

- Providing a stable, consistent environment where basic needs are met.
- Establishing facilities in low-crime areas.
- Having appropriate on-site security including video surveillance and restricted entry.
- Keeping housing locations confidential.
- Providing protection against harassment, threats of violence, and physical violence from those within and outside the TLP.

Emotional safety is made possible after physical safety has been achieved, and can be supported through:

- The presence of nonjudgmental staff.
- Policies and rules that are clear and universally enforced.

- Displaying symbols that indicate the environment is LGBTQ-affirming.
- Using appropriate language on printed materials (including multiple options for self-identification of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression [SOGIE] on forms).
- Having a diverse staff with identities similar to the youth.
- Assuring privacy, especially for transgender residents.
- Providing protection from verbal harassment and physical assault.

Key Findings: Providers' Views of Youth Safety and Affirmation

Service providers' thoughts about creating a safe and affirming environment were similar to those recounted by youth. They emphasized the importance of showing youth they care through:

- Consistent and active engagement.
- Using symbols, such as LGBTQ-friendly signage and artifacts, to support perceptions of safety.
- Being affirming, knowledgeable, nonjudgmental, and flexible.
- Having comparable or similar identities to the youth they serve.
- Trying to create a healthy, family-like environment.
- Consistently enforcing policies that support safety and affirmation.

Creating Safe and Affirming Space: Implications for Policy and Practice

A safe and affirming environment for LGBTQ youth in TLPs depends upon many different but interconnected elements. Providers can enhance—or detract from—youth perceptions that a TLP is a safe and affirming place by considering the following:

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Enhanced SOGIE knowledge. TLPs can enhance youth experiences through increased SOGIE knowledge and a better understanding of the needs of LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth (RHY). Training should include teaching providers appropriate and affirming language, showing them how to elicit SOGIE information from youth, and helping them learn how to discuss SOGIE topics. Providers should be comfortable engaging youth in SOGIE conversations, as many youth will wait for someone else to take the lead. This type of engagement will also demonstrate that these and other topics are safe to discuss.

Providers should also be well versed about why SOGIE information is being collected and how it will be used, as well as any agency policies that affirm or detract from diverse identities of LGBTQ youth.

Consistent provider engagement. Provider behavior can also have a lasting impact on youth. For example, youth reported feeling affirmed when staff members were physically and emotionally present, interacted with them regularly, and attempted to build family-like relationships with them. They also reported that providers who shared personal experiences helped encourage resiliency. Providers can also affirm youth by offering encouragement by using a collaborative decision-making process concerning goals and services.

Enforcement of agency rules and policies. Providers can support youth by immediately intervening in the case of bullying or physical violence from peers or other providers, and through transparent, consistent enforcement of agency rules and policies.

Affirmation and individualization. All providers in TLPs must move beyond simple tolerance toward acceptance and affirmation. Many providers spoke about acceptance as a way of making youth feel affirmed and

safe, although acceptance can imply passivity and may not go far enough. By contrast, affirmation requires engagement, action, and advocacy.

Affirmation means understanding how all of a youth's ethnic, racial, religious, and other identities intersect with SOGIE and may serve as barriers to self-affirmation and affirmation by others. This necessitates an individualized approach to serving youth, rather than offering the same resources or services to everyone. Equality in services does not always promote equity, especially for youth who are marginalized in multiple ways. This is especially true for LGBTQ youth of color, who are overrepresented among RHY.

Key Findings: Youth-Identified Barriers to Safety and Affirmation

LGBTQ youth generally reported feeling safe and affirmed. However, at least one person from every program described an experience that made them feel unsafe, unsupported, or not affirmed. Those barriers may be applicable to a wider range of organizations and thus warrant additional consideration.

Barriers include:

- Peers, particularly heterosexual or cisgender peers asking inappropriate questions or using homophobic or transphobic language
- Staff, administrators, and other service providers lacking training or an understanding of how to work effectively with LGBTQ youth
- Internal agency or organizational factors, such as lack of transparency or an inconsistent application of policies and practices, which can create distrust

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Key Findings: Provider-Identified Barriers to Safety and Affirmation

Multiple individual, agency, and systemic barriers challenge providers' ability to ensure LGBTQ youth safety and active affirmation of their identities.

Examples of person-related barriers:

- Youth or providers who have limited or inaccurate knowledge about SOGIE
- Providers who pathologize LGBTQ identities, or have biases about LGBTQ people, especially those who are transgender, non-binary, or gender fluid; seeing LGBTQ youth as “other” or not “normal” and asking them to “fit in”
- Providers who have difficulty understanding and consistently enforcing LGBTQ-affirming policies, such as those prohibiting hate speech or verbal harassment
- Perceptions that staff who are not LGBTQ cannot relate to LGBTQ youth

Examples of agency-specific barriers:

- Difficulties resulting from the physical environment, such as a lack of single-stall restrooms
- Conflicting demands of stakeholders, such as government classification systems and housing rules, licensing requirements, or funding restrictions
- Policies that promote exclusion rather than inclusion
- Frequent and rapid organizational change, including staff turnover or programming changes
- A lack of in-house capacity and resources necessary to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth

Examples of external barriers:

- Inability to identify affirming partners for job training, mental and physical healthcare, care for specific groups, and legal assistance
- Lack of support for LGBTQ RHY in the community, especially for youth of color

Barriers to Safety and Affirmation: Implications for Policy and Practice

One of the main barriers youth identified as having an impact on their ability to feel safe and affirmed was their peers. There are also programmatic or systematic challenges that can have a negative impact.

Youth and staff SOGIE education. As with any environment where youth are dealing with a multitude of environmental stressors, there is a high likelihood of conflict. This can be minimized through education of all youth about SOGIE.

There is often a misconception that only heterosexual or cisgender youth need education about SOGIE. However, based on this project's findings, it is clear all youth could benefit from additional education around these topics.

Staff may also need additional training and coaching in this area to ensure they are not perpetuating myths about LGBTQ people nor are they disseminating incorrect SOGIE information. Having policies in place prohibiting gender- and sexual orientation-based bullying can only go so far if providers and staff don't understand what SOGIE-based bullying is, what it looks like, and how to appropriately address it within the TLP.

Youth and staff may also benefit from additional education around using affirming language related to SOGIE, whether or not one identifies as part of the LGBTQ community.

A language-positive approach. Although there is some value in marginalized groups reclaiming words that were previously meant to disparage them, it is recommended TLPs take a more language-positive approach and encourage youth to use language that is appropriate for use by all. This will assist with the reduction of heteronormative and cisnormative bias within TLPs, as well as help decrease internalized homophobia

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and transphobia, and encourage acceptance of diverse identities within the larger LGBTQ community. This process can be enhanced by clearly outlining expectations for appropriate language and behavior for all providers and youth at first contact with them.

Recognizing all aspects of SOGIE. It appears that most providers have a better understanding of the concept of sexual orientation than they do of gender identity. In order to provide safe and affirming spaces for all of the youth they serve, agencies must continually encourage youth and providers to conceptualize all three aspects of SOGIE—sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression—as non-binary concepts, as well as affirm identities that fall along the gender and sexuality spectrums. Providers must continually work against conceptualizing youth as “normal” or “regular” based on where they identify on these spectrums.

Staff hiring and retention. TLPs who serve LGBTQ youth are encouraged to hire employees who have experience working with LGBTQ communities or who share similar identities in terms of race, ethnicity, and SOGIE. By actively recruiting diverse administrators and staff members, TLPs can help show youth that diverse identities are affirmed within the agency. These staff members can also serve as models of successful career achievement and independent living.

Another way to sustain a safe and affirming environment is through minimizing staff turnover. This promotes a more family-like atmosphere and helps ensure that in-house capacity to effectively serve LGBTQ RHY remains high.

Limiting programmatic changes. Organizations struggle to create safe and affirming environments, especially when they have limited physical or financial resources and when the needs of the youth conflict

with the needs of the funders or larger systems of governance. Much like minimizing turnover, limiting programmatic changes may help sustain a safe and affirming environment for youth. Although some programmatic changes may be mandated by funders or the government, the impact of such changes can be minimized by taking a proactive approach to implementation. Staff must be adequately educated about programmatic changes before they are implemented in order to assess the potential impact changes may have on the safety and affirmation of LGBTQ youth.

Managing competing stakeholder demands. Although it is unrealistic to expect complete resolution of the competing demands of stakeholders, their impact can be minimized through continued open communication between administration, staff, funders, and youth regarding the nature of these conflicts. It is also important to deal with them as they arise, rather than waiting for an incident to occur. Additional communication around data collection and data management systems designed by states and the federal government is critical, so these systems can adequately capture the diverse identities of LGBTQ youth accessing services at TLPs.

Strengthening community resources. A lack of community-based resources specific to LGBTQ youth was also identified as a major barrier. These include appropriate referral sources for housing, health and mental health care, legal assistance, educational assistance, job training, mentoring, and social support. This lack of resources was most pronounced outside large urban centers or in places with very homogenous populations. Thus, the importance of being visible in the community and building ties with community-based providers and advocacy groups cannot be



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underestimated. Promoting community visibility will also help the community become more aware of the needs of local LGBTQ RHY and assist in identifying them as part of the community itself, rather than as outsiders.

Finally, it is recommended that TLPs partner with community-based, LGBTQ-focused agencies and service providers locally and across the state. This will help establish and strengthen those community-focused connections and support the sharing information about resources for the benefit of all.

**JANE ADDAMS
COLLEGE
OF SOCIAL WORK**



UNIVERSITY of
HOUSTON

GRADUATE COLLEGE of SOCIAL WORK

Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy



Disclaimer: The individuals depicted in this report are models and the image has been used solely for illustrative purposes.

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