



Strategies for Services  
that Meet the Needs of Runaway and Homeless (RHY)  
LGBTQ Youth





## Strategies for Services that Meet the Needs of Runaway and Homeless (RHY) LGBTQ Youth

This review of needs and resulting strategies for services has been 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 service providers can better meet the needs of LGBTQ RHY.

### **Key Findings: Youths' Views of Their Needs**

To identify the unique needs of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, and assess whether transitional living programs (TLPs) are meeting those needs, youth were asked to describe how they envision their lives after leaving their TLP.

Some youth were unsure of and still developing and establishing their goals, particularly while they were still trying to meet basic day-to-day needs. However, the majority of youth clearly articulated short- and long-term goals in three areas:

- Education—the majority of youth discussed educational goals that ranged from completing their GED to pursuing higher education
- Employment and job training—youth had diverse employment and career goals; some youth saw job training programs as one way for pursuing their career aspirations
- Stability and independence—youth wanted to use the accomplishment of the first two goals, employment and education, to achieve stability, independence, and self-sufficiency

Youth did discuss their perceptions of how their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression (SOGIE) impacted their ability to achieve those goals. Some felt there was no impact. Others felt it had a negative effect on opportunities for career advancement, despite antidiscrimination laws, often due to barriers and stereotypes.

Youth also described TLP services and provider behaviors that supported their goal achievement:

- Receiving support when forming and identifying personal goals
- Having access to diverse and integrated services which allowed them to meet their educational, training, and employment goals, such as internet access, transportation passes, help with homework, and reminders to stay on track
- Being provided services focused on building life skills such as money management, interviewing, personal care, managing a household, and achieving one's developmental goals
- Helping youth to maintain and demonstrate a positive attitude

While youth generally described most of their needs as being met, and viewed their SOGIE as a way of accessing additional services, there were some gaps identified between needs and the services or supports offered by TLPs. Those included having access to:

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- Education and training, particularly when financial support was needed but the documentation required for government-based financial aid was lacking
- Diverse, appropriate employment opportunities
- Recreational programming

The majority of youth reported some connection between SOGIE and goal attainment. The areas they felt were most impacted included interpersonal relationships with peers, immediate family, and extended family:

- For some, there were negative effects on family relationships
- For others, there was a positive impact on their ability to meet their interpersonal, educational, and career goals

Those experiencing positive outcomes associated their SOGIE with resilience and empathy, a sense of self, and a connection to the larger community.

### **Key Findings: Providers' Views of Youth Needs**

Service providers identified many of the same needs that LGBTQ youth did in relation to goal attainment. However they had a more extensive and detailed list of what they identified as necessary for LGBTQ youth in TLPs to attain their educational, occupational, interpersonal, and independence goals. They identified the following needs:

- Safe housing with adequate privacy, especially for non-binary or transgender youth
- Education and employment, including knowing how to address: SOGIE questions on applications; confusion in the workplace; harassment and discrimination in educational settings; and bathroom use

- Affirming LGBTQ healthcare services including mental health, sexual health, trans-specific services, and legal services for timely name and identification changes and securing government documents
- Strong social support networks and permanent interpersonal connections, especially if traditional family networks are not available

### **Key Findings: TLPs' Strategies for Service Provision**

Providers differed in how they provided services to LGBTQ youth. However, they felt there was a benefit in youth knowing when a TLP is an LGBTQ-friendly space where they can feel safe to open up.

- One-third of the TLPs identified as LGBTQ-specific because they were focused exclusively on meeting the unique needs of LGBTQ RHY.
- Some agencies did not have in-house capacity to meet LGBTQ-specific needs, but saw value in providing targeted services for this group. This allowed them to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth while remaining true to their agency's mission of providing equal, inclusive services to all RHY.
- A number of agencies that served LGBTQ youth, as well as youth not self-identified as LGBTQ, integrated SOGIE-specific content or discussions into the general services. Such integrated services were beneficial because they allowed open discussions to occur between LGBTQ youth and their heterosexual and cisgender peers.
- Providers from 44% of the agencies used an identity-neutral approach that promoted equality

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by providing the same services to everyone. This strategy fails to recognize the impact of how different aspects of a youth's identity may have impacted their experiences with homelessness.

Although the ways in which services were offered by TLPs to LGBTQ RHY varied, providers from several agencies described drawbacks of using a standardized approach, and providers from all nine agencies emphasized the importance of an individualized approach. Individualized approaches should begin with the assumption that all youth have different needs, and youth are experts of their own situations and experiences.

### **Needs of LGBTQ RHY: Implications for Policy and Practice**

The needs of participants in this project varied widely. They ranged in age from 16 to 23; thus, they were at multiple developmental stages related to education, life skills, and career goals. Additional needs were also identified for transgender and non-binary youth. This variation underscores the importance of TLPs having multiple levels of resources available to adequately address youth's needs—particularly those associated with non-binary SOGIE, a lack of federal protections for those who identify as LGBTQ, and conflicting policies around SOGIE in education, employment, housing, health care, and legal systems.

**Educational support.** Some youth may require academic support to obtain GEDs or diplomas, while others may be ready to enroll in vocational or technical training, or college-level courses. To support these diverse needs, it is recommended that:

- TLPs have a strong knowledge of various programs available and provide support such as GED prep.
- TLPs provide their residents with access to computers with high-speed internet, as increasingly youth may prefer technology-enhanced education to traditional classroom settings.
- Educational programs provide online programming, which is especially important for LGBTQ youth who may have experienced bullying, harassment, or violence in traditional educational settings, as well as for those who may live in rural settings requiring extensive travel to the nearest community college.
- Educational programs allow youth to have their preferred names associated with email, class rosters, and online learning platforms; strategies like these will avoid outing youth and subjecting them to potential bias and discrimination.
- Educational support include how to use basic software such as Microsoft Word and Excel, as well as assisting with keyboarding skills.
- Educational funding be made available for standardized examinations, as well as tuition support for those who do not qualify for government-based financial aid due to residency status or prior interactions with the criminal justice system.

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**Job training and employment opportunities.** Youth in this study were eager to work and saw employment as their path to independence. However, there appeared to be a lack of jobs for which they were adequately trained, as well as a lack of full-time options. In addition, trans-identified youth, particularly non-binary and transfeminine youth, were especially impacted by bias in the interview and hiring process. The following should improve youth access and outcomes:

- Efforts should be made to identify opportunities, as well as those offering on-the-job training are affirming to a variety of identities for youth with limited or no work experience.
- Funding should be made available to cover transportation costs, work and interview attire, and hair care, as each help to support youth in obtaining and maintaining employment.
- Opportunities should be provided for youth to practice interviewing and public speaking.
- Support and funding to help youth obtain official documentation such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, transcripts, and state-issued ID cards should also be provided.

**Development of life skills.** Because many youth in TLPs have been exposed to the child welfare and justice systems, or come from other nontraditional backgrounds, they may not have learned basic life skills associated with independent living. For example, they may not be able to construct a budget, cook, do laundry, enroll in college, or apply for student financial aid or Medicaid. Therefore, a portion of TLP programming should include:

- Hands-on training that demonstrates the relevance of learning basic life skills associated independent living
- A range of basic to advanced life skills programming so as to support youth with a wide range of skills

**Housing assistance.** Youth emphasized the importance of housing in being able to achieve independence. However, a number of challenges were noted that need to be recognized:

- Youth may need support because they may not be able to complete many of the necessary steps on their own to secure housing, such as:
  - Securing a cosigner
  - Passing a background check
- They may also have challenges due to:
  - No credit
  - Bad credit
  - A limited employment history
  - Inadequate resources for a down payment
- It is important to recognize how the aforementioned can negatively impact a youth's ability to secure and sustain stable housing when they do not have supports to address the challenges they face.
- Because many assisted-housing programs are gender-specific and based on birth sex, transgender youth may experience particular challenges and need additional support with securing housing.

**Healthcare services.** Providers emphasized the importance of mental, physical, and sexual healthcare services for LGBTQ RHY. As part of healthcare provision:

- LGBTQ youth may require extensive education about sexual health, especially in areas where school-based sex education was not inclusive of LGBTQ youth or if they were provided an abstinence-only curriculum.



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- Providers must be familiar with LGBTQ-specific healthcare needs and be comfortable talking to youth about sexual health, risk reduction, and the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections or diseases.
- Transgender youth need access to healthcare providers who provide gender-affirming services. Although they are covered by Medicaid in some states, not all state or private insurance policies cover gender-affirmation procedures.
- There must be recognition of the challenges experienced by youth who reside outside of major urban areas and have to travel long distances to find a provider who is competent. It is not uncommon to have a shortage of qualified providers engaging in LGBTQ-affirming medical and mental health care.
- It is essential for TLPs to assemble comprehensive health resources in the immediate area and, if necessary, across the state.

### **Emotional support, mentoring and encouragement.**

Social support and peer affiliation were of primary importance to the youth surveyed. TLPs asserted that peer mentors and LGBTQ community role models assisted youth in managing transitions toward independence. Since many LGBTQ youth are estranged from family support systems, a TLP can:

- Serve as a surrogate family by providing the emotional support and encouragement a youth needs to be successful. This support may include periodic check-ins with staff, even after the youth has transitioned into the community.

- Engage in consistent, thoughtful strategies that will build a youth's self-esteem, self-worth, and empowerment.
- Implement trauma-informed care models, and when possible restorative justice-based programming, to continually care for and empower youth.

**Legal supports.** Being able to secure government-issued documentation is essential and assistance may be required for:

- Obtaining birth certificates, Social Security cards, and state-issued IDs
- Allowing transgender youth who are seeking support for name and gender marker changes to access services based on their identified gender

**Individualized services.** If standardized services are provided to LGBTQ youth, it is recommended they are supplemented with individualized services. There is a great deal of diversity within the RHY population, and a one-size-fits-all approach does little to validate their unique histories or address their unique needs.

There has been a trend in recent years to move toward identity-neutral models, but this has done little to address the additional difficulties that continue to be experienced by LGBTQ youth in housing, education, and employment relative to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Providing only identity-neutral services is problematic because:

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- Identity-neutral services do not address the specific prejudice and discrimination faced by LGBTQ youth, particularly those who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender queer
- Such services do not consider how SOGIE may intersect with other identities, especially race and ethnicity, which can impact a youth's ability to acquire stable housing and independence
- Those approaches do not adequately address the SOGIE-based trauma endured by many LGBTQ youth, which may have contributed to their experience with homelessness
- Identity-neutral services often result in the erasure of the unique experiences and voices of LGBTQ youth
- All services should be provided through an intersectional lens. LGBTQ youth of color face different challenges than White LGBTQ youth. Gay male youth face different challenges than lesbian or bisexual youth. Youth who identify as transgender, gender queer, or non-binary face different challenges than those who are cisgender. Those from more conservative religious backgrounds have challenges that are unique to them. All of these identity components should be considered together in order to affirm youth, validate their identities, and ensure their safety.

Thus, there are a number of recommendations that can offset these challenges:

- Agencies should continue to provide LGBTQ-specific services as part of programs serving all youth or in programs designed specifically for LGBTQ youth.
- There needs to be continued funding of services and programs exclusively for youth identifying as LGBTQ. These services are valuable because they provide LGBTQ youth with a safe and affirming environment, as well as a space where they can easily build connections with peers. Furthermore, these types of programs address issues of inequity by actively acknowledging the challenges faced by these youth in terms of housing, education, and employment.

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Disclaimer: The person depicted in this report is a model and the image has been used solely for illustrative purposes.

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