



Assessing the Needs of Transgender and Gender Expansive (TGE) Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY): Supplemental Report on Recommended Responses and Strategies for Providing Affirming Supportive Services



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These recommendations are drawn from research designed to supplement 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 report is intended to address gaps in knowledge about the specific experiences and needs of transgender and gender expansive (TGE) runaway and homeless youth (RHY).

Key Findings: Homeless TGE Youths' Needs

There is a lack of accurate data about the needs of TGE youth impacted by public systems. Data are usually only known when a youth self-identifies or when their sexual orientation is related to their system involvement.

To help identify the unique needs of TGE youth, focus group participants discussed their goals and whether transitional living programs (TLPs) were meeting their needs.

TGE youth goals and needs were focused on the following:

- Understanding gender expression and identity, becoming comfortable with their bodies, and learning how transgender youth successfully transitioned
- Legal support related to gender identity
- Health care support related to gender identity
- Education
- Employment and job training
- Making permanent connections
- Combating stigma, exclusion, and discrimination

Homeless TGE Youths' Needs: Implications for Policy and Practice

Service providers have made much progress building capacity to meet the needs of the homeless TGE population; however, there is still much work to be done.

These implications only partly address challenges in meeting TGE youth needs, such as a lack of funding and resources, education about issues experienced by the transgender community, and training and coaching regarding how to effectively serve TGE communities.

In order to support workers, when they are assessing and addressing youth needs, assessment tools should be revamped and training should be provided to workers.

- Work with TGE youth to understand the language they use to talk about their needs and goals, then improve the assessment tools used by workers to identify needs and goals.
 - Improve worker training and competency.
 - Assess and work to support TGE youths' personal goals and such as getting married, having a family, finding happiness, owning a home, or eliminating any reliance on assistance, such as Section 8.
 - Assess and support TGE youths' professional goals, such as owning a business or helping other youth.
- Provide services that can help TGE youth achieve their goals.
- Connect to helpful community-based services—especially transgender-specific organizations.
 - Offer help navigating systems and setting goals with deadlines.

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- Recognize that physical appearance matters and can help affirm a youth's identity. Some youth would like help with their hygiene, hair, nails, clothing, etc. As youth transition, resources such as a clothes closet might be helpful. Such supports may seem superficial, but are very important, and can be particularly useful when provided by another transgender person.
- Develop and sustain peer support, mentoring opportunities, and empowerment groups.

Understand and address unmet needs.

- Support gender-based goals through social, medical, and legal assistance.
- Provide health care, including services covered by Medicaid such as top surgery and hormone therapy.
- Offer financial support, including help building savings; this will help youth not live paycheck to paycheck.
- Track and offer transgender-specific employment services, especially in states that allow workforce discrimination.
- Provide employment support such as guidelines on when is it safe to come out to the employer and how to find safe, accepting employers.
- Provide additional legal, education, mental health, housing, and transportation support.
- Recognize that a criminal record is an additional barrier to accessing services and supports.

Key Findings: Creating a Safe and Affirming Space for TGE Youth

The TGE youth participating in the focus groups highlighted safety as a top priority. Developing a safe and affirming environment requires staff capacity and cultural education, as well as believing in the value of diverse identities.

One type of safety, emotional safety, was described as confidentiality, feeling at ease around those with whom they live, having people around who share their identities, and feeling validated in their identities by TLP staff. TGE youth emphasized the following impacted their feelings of safety and affirmation:

- Having all aspects of a youth's identity, including race, ethnicity, gender identity, ability, religion, and culture affirmed
- Paying attention to both physical and emotional safety, particularly because TGE youth have a higher risk of experiencing physical and emotional violence
- Having practices, policies, and accountability measures in place that ensure physical and emotional safety
- Being free from stigma, discrimination, harassment, and violence
- Having TLPs located in low-crime neighborhoods
- Providing interaction with culturally competent social workers
- Having TLP staff use inclusive language
- Providing access to staff members who share similar gender expressions, gender identities, race, ethnicity, and abilities

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Creating a Safe and Affirming Space for TGE Youth: Implications for Policy and Practice

TGE youth are some of the most vulnerable, experiencing great marginalization and numerous barriers from multiple systems. By creating safe and affirming environments, TLPs have an opportunity to lead the field by ensuring the voices and experiences of TGE youth are heard. The following will allow this to occur:

Offer stability, security, and privacy.

- Provide stability through a calm, rather than chaotic, environment. Youth support having rules such as no profanity or fighting, and expressed the importance of alone time, privacy, and personal space
- Boundaries are very important and single rooms are preferred.
- Feelings of safety can change as residents and staff come and go.
- Placements should be according to gender identity.
- A housing program should not feel like a detention facility. Random room inspections are not appreciated, nor are overly strict rules such as zero physical contact and absolute silence after bedtime.
- Locks on the doors and requiring a key to enter the building can help youth feel safe.

Affirm all aspects of a youth's identity.

- Race, ethnicity, and other aspects of a youth's identity must be incorporated into responses to youth needs.
- It is extremely important for staff to respect a youth's preferred name and gender pronouns.
- Staff should not make assumptions about youth, for example, expressing surprise if a youth does not have HIV.

Address barriers to creating a safe and affirming agency.

- Program rules can sometimes conflict with youths' need to feel safe. For example, one youth noted that a program he was in did not allow weapons, but as a Black transgender man, he felt the need to carry a knife. It is important to acknowledge such feelings while clearly enforcing the rules, such as "no weapons allowed."

Key Findings: Discussion of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression (SOGIE) within TLPs

There is a lack of accurate data about the incidence of TGE youth who enter into systems for homeless youth. TLPs cannot adequately provide services to TGE youths if their identities, and the issues they experience, are unknown to the frontline staff and system leaders.

Youth from both focus groups recalled providers asking them about SOGIE on documentation or during the intake interview, and expressed a range of views about discussing SOGIE with TLPs.

- The majority of TGE youth in the focus groups reported they would disclose SOGIE information to providers only after they deemed the environment as safe and affirming.
- Having staff members with whom TGE youth could identify, as well as feelings of trust, often dictated when and if youth disclosed their SOGIE.
- When staff were more knowledgeable and skilled in handling gender identity issues, TGE youth were more likely to feel safe to disclose.
- Many youth did not want to identify as transgender, instead preferring to be counted within the binary as male or female even if they did not have a cis identity.
- Youth thought it was important to know how information would be used.

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Discussion of SOGIE within TLPs: Implications for Policy and Practice

SOGIE training would be of great benefit for staff members who have little interaction with this community. Even more important is hiring qualified staff who share the same complex identities of these youth. In addition, there are steps TLPs can take to make discussions of SOGIE more effective.

Understand how youth want to be asked about SOGIE.

- Some youth discussed how a staff member built trust by treating the youth as a friend or equal and making conversation.
- One youth, who preferred privacy, felt embarrassed when the TLP made a big deal out of their transgender identity.
- Youth felt that having intake run by a cis White male exacerbated an already stressful, emotional situation.
- Youth wanted staff to provide affirmation and support as they ask questions, to prevent the process from feeling clinical.
- Even though the timing can be uncomfortable, basic questions should be asked at intake so that the best placement can be discussed. Questions should not go beyond the basics.
- Youth want to be seen as a whole human being.

Respond to challenges in collecting SOGIE data.

- Staff should not conflate sexual orientation with gender identity.
- Youth who are just starting to transition might feel insecure and not want to recognize their sex assigned at birth.

- One youth discussed the difficulties of maintaining gender presentation while homeless, and not being accepted to a homeless shelter that matched their gender identity.

Key Findings: Strategies for Service Provision

It is crucial that TLPs create new strategies and tools to meet the needs of TGE youth. In addition to often not receiving proper standards of care and service provision, additional problems for these youth can range from discrepancies in bathroom usage and bed assignment to safety requirements.

TGE youth provided their thoughts on service provision.

- TLPs need to mandate staff to respect, honor, and affirm the identity development of all youth.
- Preferred gender pronouns of TGE youth must be respected.
- Legal services are needed to address many of the barriers experienced by TGE youth.
- Employment services should be provided to help move youth forward.
- Health care services critical to identity development should be integrated into TLP programs.
- Most feelings of being unsafe come from other peers, not the staff.

Strategies for Service Provision: Implications for Policy and Practice

Given the over-representation of TGE youth who are homeless, additional funding and specialized services are critical for responding to their invisibility within TLPs. In addition, there are steps TLPs can take to provide services in an affirming manner.

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Honor and respect TGE identities.

- If chosen names, pronouns, and expression are not being honored, fair and affirming policies and procedures need to be implemented to address each incidence of noncompliance, as well as instances of hate speech.
- Add to the number of providers who share similar gender identities and expressions as the youth being served.
- Use gender-affirming and non-cisnormative language in all TLP environments.
- Identify and implement strategies that will increase feelings of safety that can be impeded by peers.

Provide gender-affirming access to health care, legal assistance, and employment pipelines.

- In addition to general medical care, consider offering access to gender-affirming medical interventions such as hormone blockers, hormones, and surgeries.
- Prevent discrimination by facilitating access to health professionals who are knowledgeable and skilled in providing medical care, affirmative of diverse gender identities and expression.
- Facilitate access to legal services for name and gender marker changes. This may also enhance access to education and employment opportunities.
- Recognize that limited access to legal documents, with preferred name and gender markers, may significantly impact an individual's access to employment, especially if the documented name and gender marker impacts employers' perceptions of the TGE RHY applicant.

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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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