

Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ+ People Experiencing Houselessness along the I-5 Corridor in Oregon

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Introduction

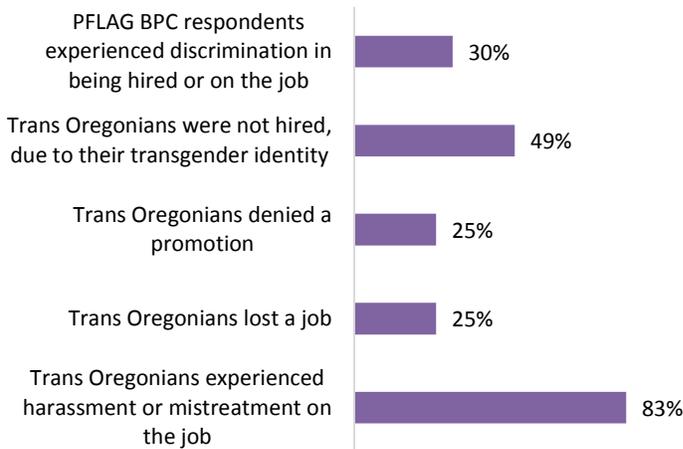
Oregon's LGBTQ+ houseless population is facing structural inequalities, barriers to accessing services, and increased risks. This is well-documented and has been thoroughly examined in recent national reports. Key policy-level suggestions in the wake of these reports include those developed by Lambda Legal & National Youth Advocacy Coalition (2009) and Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund (2001). Both reports recommend to (1) issue, adopt, and implement statewide nondiscrimination policies, practice standards, confidentiality policies, and sound recruitment and hiring practices, and (2) mandate training and competency to all agency employees and volunteers on LGBTQ issues that are faced specifically by LGBTQ youth.

Because services to assist LGBTQ+ people are not clearly described in the I-5 corridor, the present study investigated the service provider network for LGBTQ+ houseless young adults in Lane, Linn, Benton, Marion, Multnomah, and Clackamas Counties in Oregon. The goal of this exploratory-descriptive research was to understand the extent of services for LGBTQ+ people experiencing houselessness, discover possible barriers to accessing services, and provide recommendations for improvement.

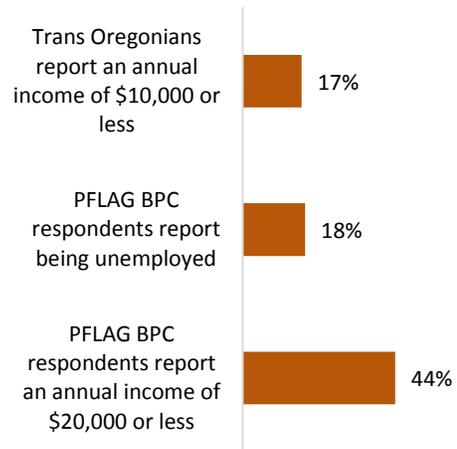
Background

According to a 2012 Williams Institute report, 20-40% of youth experiencing houselessness in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ, and at least 40% of youth experiencing houselessness¹ in the Portland metro area identify as LGBTQ. When asked why they are houseless, 46% report family rejection; 43% are forced out by parents/guardians; 32% are experiencing physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse at home; and 17% have aged out of the fostercare system. There are significant disparities for people of color and transgender people in Oregon that persist and impact the ability to secure housing. Data depicted below are from 2012 report titled "Lift Every Voice: The Black LGBTQ Oregonian Experience" by PFLAG Portland Black Chapter (PFLAG PBC) and The Urban League of Portland as well as a 2011 report "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey".

Workplace Discrimination



Income Inequality



The data suggest a clear connection between workplace discrimination, income inequality, and houselessness, and 23% of trans Oregonians reported becoming houseless because of their gender identity/expression.

Method

For this study, individual interviews with 25 LGBTQ+ participants and 10 service providers were conducted, asking four main questions centered on describing best practices for serving LGBTQ+ people. The questions were: (1) How can you tell if an organization or service provider is LGBTQ+ friendly? (2) What information do service providers need to know so that they can better understand and serve LGBTQ+ young adults? (3) What are some of the main things service providers struggle with in serving LGBTQ+ young adults? (4) What services do you know about that might be valuable to LGBTQ+ young adults experiencing houselessness or housing insecurity? All 25 individual participants self-identified as LGBTQ+, were over 18, and spoke English.

Results

Analysis of interviews identified three overriding themes with a number of associated sub-themes:

In order to create **Safe, Welcoming, and Inclusive Environments**, service providers need (1)welcoming signage and visuals, (2) a variety of people represented in the organization, the ability to (3) resolve conflicts and be supportive of LGBTQ+ people in dealing with other clients, (4) welcoming language and properly addressing people, and a (5) reflective and intentional organizational culture. A reflective and intentional organizational culture is key to making and keeping services safe for LGBTQ+ people to access, and relies on:

- a) Openness to learning and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ identities and needs
- b) Honest evaluations of the organization and services
- c) Strengths-based and client-empowering services
- d) Confronting stereotypes, stigmas, and assumptions
- e) Addressing internalized biases and misconceptions
- f) Commitment to continual learning and staying updated.

The **LGBTQ+ Knowledge** that is needed involves (1) understanding systems of oppression (2) understanding a multitude of identities and avoiding essentializing one identity (3) understanding that people have multiple intersecting identities (4) understanding common life experiences of LGBTQ+ people experiencing houselessness (5) understanding trans identities and unique needs. Information on common life experiences of LGBTQ+ people experiencing houselessness includes but is not limited to understanding experiences of:

- a) Trauma
- b) Suicide and self-harm
- c) Substance abuse
- d) Police brutality and sexual assault
- e) Family and peer rejection
- f) Religious-based persecution
- g) Unemployment and difficulty in the job market
- h) Survival crimes, survival sex and sex work

Additionally, many concerns in accessing housing services revolve around accessibility related to gender. Some of the information that aids in understanding trans identities and unique needs are:

- a) Understanding the variety of trans experiences
- b) Unique needs of non-binary people
- c) Disparities in LGBTQ+ services for trans people
- d) The need for competent and confidential medical treatment
- e) Safe physical spaces

LGBTQ+ Specific Support and Advocacy includes efforts to advocate for LGBTQ+ people and LGBTQ+ services, help people navigate services, and provide emotional and social support. Four simple direct action items relevant to all service providers are (1) provide gender neutral restrooms, (2) appropriately address people by asking their name and pronouns upfront, (3) have forms that include multiple gender options and the option to disclose sexual orientation upfront, and (4) in gender-segregated situations, allow all people to participate based on their gender identity, not on genitalia or sex assigned at birth.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study is Oregon-specific, but it is safe to say that many of the experiences shared are similar to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people living in other parts of the U.S. Other states could address and approach the same or related issues with a customized focus based on state laws, capacity of advocacy organizations, political climate, and social service provider networks.

Five areas for further action are outlined below. These recommendations emerged in both the 2001 and the 2009 reports Lambda Legal noted in the Introduction, and are strongly supported by the current research.

1. Collect and Evaluate Data

Adding LGBTQ+ identities to routine data collection at federal, state, and local levels could greatly aid in illuminating any disparities LGBTQ+ people are facing and give a voice to their experiences. Data can inform and track progress of efforts to mitigate the disparities, heighten risks, and structural barriers that LGBTQ+ people face. Adding gender and sexual orientation to forms not only validates people's identities and lives, but it fills in the gaps of knowledge about the LGBTQ+ population: their experiences, their identities, and their representation in all institutions, geographies, and walks of life. Asking questions about gender and sexuality on intake forms can help service providers provide affirming and inclusive services to LGBTQ+ people; however, questions about gender or sexual identity cannot be asked to determine the eligibility of a person to participate in services and people should be free to decline to answer. The ongoing collection and evaluation of data specific to intervention efforts allows us to adjust our policies and practices as needed and keep up with applications and reporting for grants, which may fund intervention efforts. There is an increasing amount of data being collected and research conducted specific to the LGBTQ+ population and transgender rights specifically are reaching new ground³, especially with respect to necessary medical coverage.

2. Update Shelter Policies and Practices

According to fair housing law, shelters should already be accessible to transgender people, but because in Oregon these policies have been left to each individual shelter to develop for itself rather than be uniform statewide, competence in serving transgender people has not been prioritized in all shelters. This inconsistency in what to expect from shelters can pose a huge barrier to transgender people seeking shelter, and may affect whether they seek shelter at all. The negative experiences respondents described indicate that this information is not making it to the service provider level and it is not being prioritized as essential training. The responses from participants highlight significant gaps in service provider knowledge and significant barriers to accessing services. Forms and data collection are not uniform and opportunities to disclose sexual orientation and self-identify gender vary wildly. Service provider education on LGBTQ+ identities is not mandated or required and when it is being done, it is often limited⁵.

3. Improve Information Sharing and Networking

Suggestions from Lambda Legal & National Youth Advocacy Coalition (2009) and Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund (2001) focus on building connections and networks of support to address the needs of LGBTQ+ people. These include service provider connections to LGBTQ+ organizations and the LGBTQ+ community, affirming religious communities, schools, shelters, and health care professionals. A state-wide network of LGBTQ+ affirming service providers and policy-makers as well as coalitions between rural and urban agencies could help address LGBTQ+ education and training for communities that may not have specialized services or who face financial barriers to accessing specialized services and trainings. It is also suggested to create and distribute a statewide directory of resources for LGBTQ+ youth. A print copy may be especially valuable for youth who lack regular access to internet or phone service or whose environment is closely monitored and dangerously homophobic. Similar to the Rose City Resource guide distributed by Street Roots (rosecityresource.org), there could be a LGBTQ+ specific guide or indicators in the existing guide designating LGBTQ+ friendliness. Word of mouth is one of the main ways LGBTQ+ share resources with one another regarding service providers; however, a public indicator for LGBTQ+ friendliness could be helpful for people less connected to the LGBTQ+ community or desiring more anonymity and privacy in seeking services. Basic Rights Oregon maintains a list of providers and efforts to detail service networks for trans-specific needs are ongoing. There are a variety of identity-based, medical, geographic, and service-specific Facebook groups available for information sharing as well as service provider networks and groups that meet monthly in Salem and Portland to address LGBTQ+ specific services and needs. Further coordination of networks and resources could assist with implementing some of the recommendations in this report as well as streamline efforts to address the needs specific to trans health care.

4. Engage Faith-based Services

In religious based services, there is often a lack of awareness of LGBTQ+ identities along with a wide spectrum of LGBTQ+ affirming or rejecting churches⁶. There is a lot to be gained by investing in dialogue and education between LGBTQ+ religious people and allies, as many providers seek to offer care and assistance, not abuse and harm. Unfortunately, religious groups that are affirming are likely going to be lumped in with bad experiences LGBTQ+ people have had with religious people or churches until there is some way to know with credibility that a religious-based service provider or church is in fact affirming and safe for LGBTQ+ people. Religious organizations may need to do extensive relationship building and education about LGBTQ+ identities before being recognized as an affirming place by LGBTQ+ people. There is a growing interest and focus on mending some of the religious-based harm and persecution people have faced, and those efforts may prove fruitful for all involved.

5. Explore Innovative Ways to Address Houselessness

Houselessness is a national (and global) issue that requires attention on federal, state, local government levels as well as community and individual responses. The suggestions to improve services here do not address the larger context of shelter systems and affordable

housing programs that are usually at capacity⁷. Specific attention to LGBTQ+ young adult houselessness is being spearheaded by national organizations such as 40 to None Network (<http://fortytonone.org/>) which seeks to address houselessness on multiple levels. Community responsibility in responding to houselessness can prove fruitful⁸. One example created in 1998 out of a grassroots effort to address GLBTQ youth homelessness is The GLBT Host Home Program (<http://avenuesforyouth.org/programs-glbthosthome.html>). The GLBT Host Home Program is an 'outside-the-system' community and volunteer-based response to youth houselessness. Adult volunteers open their homes to provide houseless gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth with a safe home and supporting, healthy, and nurturing connection, in addition to stability and basic needs. Innovative thinking and multi-level and multi-system approaches are all needed to address houselessness.

Conclusion

Interviews revealed that while there is excellent work being done in Oregon in many areas, there is still widespread inconsistency in affirming services relating to housing and healthcare. While many shelters aim to go above and beyond in serving LGBTQ+ people and there are LGBTQ+ specific services in the Portland area, there is not any assurance or consistency across Oregon that LGBTQ+ will be welcomed, treated fairly, or be able to access services safely, if at all. The attention and care given to LGBTQ+ people through proper education of staff, affirming forms and paperwork, physical spaces, and services is largely done voluntarily and at each service providers' goodwill. Interviews confirmed that assumptions about gender and unnecessarily gendered processes and spaces are significant barriers to transgender and gender non-conforming people. Likewise, interviewees testified that small changes in signage, forms, physical spaces, and interpersonal interaction can make a huge difference.

The full OSU Masters in Public Policy essay is available with all notes and appendices at <http://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/handle/1957/56166>.

Additional Reading

Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, Colleen Sullivan et al. (2001). *Youth in the Margins: A report on the unmet needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents in foster care*. Retrieved from <http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/youth-in-the-margins>

Lambda Legal, National Youth Advocacy Coalition (2009). *National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth*. Retrieved from http://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth_0.pdf

Notes

1. Many of the people I interviewed identify themselves as people experiencing houselessness. This is a shift in our language and understanding that puts the focus on the experience of not having a physical structure to reside in. Shifting the language from “homeless people” to people experiencing houselessness is important because (1) it addresses people as people first (2) it centers an experience a person is having and emphasizes the possibility of it being a temporary reality (3) it allows for “home” to be left for individuals to define and create with networks of belonging and security that may or may not end up being tied to biological family members or physical housing. Oregon’s Ending Homeless Advisory Council’s (EHAC) definition of “homelessness” as being without a decent, safe, stable, and permanent place to live that is fit for human habitation is the same definition I describe as houseless.
2. The Transgender Discrimination Survey of 2012 is being re-done as the U.S. Trans Survey in the summer of 2015. Visit their website to get more information about the study and opportunities to participate (<http://www.ustranssurvey.org/>).
3. As my study progressed, it became clear that there is a wide variety of information available regarding best practices, for example I came across a guide from the year 2000 indicating how to respectfully and appropriately serve trans youth in the child welfare system (DeCrescenzo, T., & Mallon, Gerald P., 2000). This information is available and has been for a while. The vast literature I was able to come across is more than enough information for service providers and policy makers to be informed. It is important to note that many of the guides I was able to find are not included in academic search engines, and they may be missed altogether by people seeking this information.
4. Faith-based services pose unique challenges, as they are not held to the same standards according to the law in being universally accessible and non-discriminatory. Their faith-based nature presents a large barrier to LGBTQ+ people who may not attempt to access faith-based services due to prior negative experiences with religion or who may be barred from services or experience discrimination and abuse while attempting to access faith-based services. This need not be a reason to deride faith-based services or to make blanket statements about faith-based services, as there are many places doing wonderful work. However, there are also places that are sometimes discriminatory and when they are the only option in an area for shelter, the risks for LGBTQ+ people accessing those services are amplified. People are put in situations where they have to weigh the benefits of having a place to sleep versus the drain on their emotional, psychological, and mental well-being due to discrimination and hate.
5. The shelter system being at capacity requires efforts to find temporary solutions, manage quality of life concerns, and find ways to mitigate the environmental impact of people who are inevitably still living on the street or in parks. Special attention should be given to approaches that are relatively low cost but have a high impact in addressing quality of life for people experiencing houselessness. Innovations that help people meet their basic needs, access social services, access legal assistance and limit involvement in legal system, promote dialogue and collaboration with law enforcement and service providers, invest in housing, and consider sanctioned camping and car camping programs are all needed.
6. As we understand systems of oppression and the ways unique identities are exposed to elevated levels of risk in our society through poverty, discrimination, and systemic violence, we can begin to pool our knowledge and be creative in our solutions, as we see the problems of houseless LGBTQ+ youth as being an extension of our own and see houseless people as a part of our communities, with their wellbeing tied to our own. This type of thinking can mobilize LGBTQ+ people and allies with societal privileges related to race and economic status to see their connection to houseless

youth, trans people, and people of color and move toward addressing the historical misuses of power that marginalized and sought to erase the very identities that were at the center of the Stonewall Riots. By acknowledging how the policing of public spaces and the prison-industrial complex specifically targets LGBTQ people, people of color, and the poor and houseless, we can see the need to re-center our movements based on the leadership of members of our community that inhabit all of those targeted identities, trans women of color, sex workers, and the poor and houseless within the LGBTQ community.