

Getting Down to Basics

Tools to Support LGBTQ Youth in Care

Congregate Care Providers Working with LGBTQ Youth

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth placed in group homes and other congregate care facilities are significantly more likely to be subjected to harassment, discrimination and violence than their non-LGBTQ peers. Blatant hostility and verbal abuse toward LGBTQ youth are often an accepted aspect of institutional culture. Congregate care providers should be aware of these dangers and create a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTQ youth.

ENSURE THE SAFETY OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN CONGREGATE CARE.

Child welfare and juvenile justice professionals have a legal obligation to protect the physical and psychological safety of LGBTQ youth in their care, whether these youth are placed in group homes, residential treatment centers, correctional centers or other facilities. As congregate care providers, you play an important role in creating an environment that ensures the protection of LGBTQ youth from harassment and discrimination. This includes intervening in situations between youth, or when other staff harass or disparage LGBTQ youth.

TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS TO ADDRESS ANTI-LGBTQ HARASSMENT IN THE FACILITY.

Send a clear message throughout the facility that anti-LGBTQ harassment will not be tolerated. Consistently model and communicate that message to all staff and residents. Never blame LGBTQ youth for being open about their identity when others subject them to harassment or violence, and don't allow others to blame them for their own mistreatment.

PROVIDE OR PARTICIPATE IN LGBTQ SENSITIVITY AND AWARENESS TRAINING.

Inquire whether your agency offers training that prepares staff to work effectively and appropriately with LGBTQ young people. An ideal training program includes suggestions for

creating and maintaining a safe environment for LGBTQ young people, as well as strategies for responding to harassment and discrimination. If your agency does not offer training on LGBTQ issues, seek out the information and support you need from resources in your community, the Internet, books and videos. For more information, see the pullout entitled *Recommendations for Training & Education on LGBTQ Issues* in this tool kit.

ADHERE TO CONSISTENT POLICIES REGARDING AGE-APPROPRIATE ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC BEHAVIOR.

LGBTQ youth in congregate care should be afforded the same rights and privileges that non-LGBTQ youth have regarding dating, displays of affection and romantic relationships. It's important for LGBTQ youth to be able to express age-appropriate romantic behavior, and to feel validated and worthy.

MAKE APPROPRIATE, INDIVIDUALIZED CLASSIFICATION AND HOUSING DECISIONS.

Don't make housing decisions based on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. For example, never assume that all LGBTQ youth are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors than their heterosexual peers, or that they're all potential sex offenders. Conversely, don't isolate or segregate LGBTQ young people, or prohibit them from having roommates, as a means of ensuring their safety. While you may

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

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have good intentions, this will only deprive LGBTQ youth of opportunities to interact with their peers and will compound their feelings of isolation.

In sex-segregated facilities, don't automatically assign transgender youth to the girls' or boys' units based on the sex assigned to them at birth. Instead, make housing decisions on a case-by-case basis, considering the physical and mental well-being of the youth. Safety and privacy should be prioritized without resorting to isolating these youth from the general population. However, single occupancy rooms, if available, may be an acceptable alternative for transgender youth in sex-segregated facilities.

BE AWARE OF THE NEEDS OF TRANSGENDER YOUTH IN CONGREGATE CARE SETTINGS.

Transgender youth in congregate care settings are often subject to discrimination. Staff in congregate care settings should be aware of the needs of these youth and support them in their gender identity without requiring them to

conform to traditional gender norms. Allow youth to express their gender identity through their attire, names, pronouns and grooming choices. Be prepared to advocate for transgender youth to receive competent and affirming mental health and medical services, including access to monitored use of hormones if deemed medically appropriate. For more information, please see the pullout entitled *Working with Transgender Youth* in this tool kit.

PROTECT LGBTQ YOUTH FROM SEXUAL ABUSE.

LGBTQ youth are often vulnerable and at increased risk for sexual abuse in congregate care settings. Staff should assess risk of sexual victimization and abuse of LGBTQ youth in a sensitive manner. Special attention should be given to prevent, detect and respond to sexual assault of LGBTQ youth. In 2012, the Department of Justice released national standards in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (PREA), aimed at protecting inmates and detained juveniles from sexual abuse. For more information about how the PREA standards protect LGBTQ people, please read the National Center for Transgender Equality fact sheet found here: www.transequality.org/Resources/PREA_July2012.pdf.

DISPLAY LGBTQ-SUPPORTIVE SIGNS AND SYMBOLS.

By displaying LGBTQ-supportive symbols such as pink triangles, rainbows or safe zone stickers, you send the clear message to all youth and staff that you support and affirm LGBTQ youth and are open to discussing LGBTQ issues. LGBTQ youth are quick to pick up on these cues from their environment, and it often makes an enormous difference just

having them displayed. LGBTQ-supportive materials are available free of charge online, and include Lambda Legal's LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care poster, included in this tool kit and available in English and Spanish (www.lambdalegal.org).

HELP LGBTQ YOUTH TO ACCESS COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

Reduce the alienation and isolation LGBTQ youth often experience by providing opportunities for them to interact positively with their LGBTQ peers, and by helping them realize that they're not alone and that other people their age share their experiences.

Develop an up-to-date list of LGBTQ resources in your community and distribute it to everyone in your agency,

including to youth who may wish privately to contact community resources on their own. For more information check www.lambdalegal.org and www.cwla.org, your nearest LGBT community center (see the National Association

“ I got jumped by a bunch of guys in my group home, and when I told the director he said, ‘Well, if you weren’t a faggot, they wouldn’t beat you up.’ ”

—Youth in Care

of LGBT Community Centers at www.lgbtcenters.org) or the local chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (www.pflag.com).

For sample LGBTQ policies in out-of-home care settings, contact Lambda Legal at 212-809-8585 or toll-free at 1-866-LGBTTeen (1-866-542-8336).



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