

# Faith-Based Providers Working with LGBTQ Youth

Faith-based organizations and individuals motivated by their religious commitment have long played an important role in providing unbiased charitable and social services. Indeed, many religious communities welcome and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people, and many individuals are motivated by their religious faith to help LGBTQ youth in foster care. But the anti-LGBTQ beliefs of some religious traditions may create ideological barriers that undermine the professional obligation to create a supportive system of care for LGBTQ youth.

## **EXAMINE PERSONAL BELIEFS THAT MIGHT CONFLICT WITH PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS TO LGBTQ YOUTH.**

The child welfare system is responsible for providing all youth in care a safe living environment free from harassment, humiliation and abuse. An LGBTQ young person should never be placed in a setting where he or she will be subject to religious condemnation or indoctrination. Child welfare practitioners and foster parents should acknowledge and examine any anti-LGBTQ biases they might have. If these personal religious beliefs might prevent offering nonjudgmental care to an LGBTQ young person, the practitioner or foster parent should seek outside support and make alternative care arrangements. They must put the needs of young people above their own personal beliefs.

## **RESPECT FEDERAL AND STATE CONSTITUTIONAL PROHIBITIONS AGAINST RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION.**

Faith-based agencies that receive government funds to provide social services or that care for children in state custody must adhere to the bedrock constitutional mandate of separation of church and state. This means that they cannot discriminate on the basis of religious

beliefs or engage in religious proselytizing against those who are LGBTQ. Many faith-based organizations have long provided important social services while respecting civil rights and the separation of church and state.

## **RESPECT THE RIGHT OF LGBTQ YOUTH NOT TO BE SUBJECTED TO RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION.**

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom, which includes the right to be free from government-sponsored religious indoctrination and the freedom not to subscribe to a particular religion or set of religious beliefs. As agents of the state, it's imperative that foster parents and other child welfare professionals not impose their personal religious beliefs on children in their care. LGBTQ young people often feel forced to hide their identities from their foster parents and caregivers and to join religious organizations that condemn homosexuality. Young people in foster care should never feel as though they must choose between being open and supported in their sexual orientation or gender identity and feeling welcome in a particular placement.

## **FOSTERING TRANSITIONS**

A CWLA/Lambda Legal  
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## ENSURE THAT POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS ARE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT AND AFFIRM LGBTQ YOUTH.

Child welfare policy makers at faith-based agencies should issue clear written policies and guidelines that mandate nondiscrimination and equal treatment for all young people in care, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Professional standards should be developed based on the needs of children and youth. These standards should also be incorporated into the licensing requirements for foster and group homes and enforced by all public and private licensing agents. Religious beliefs should never be used as justification for denying supportive services for LGBTQ youth in care.

## MANDATE TRAINING ON LGBTQ ISSUES FOR CHILD WELFARE STAFF AND FOSTER PARENTS.

All caregivers should be prepared to deal appropriately with sexual orientation and gender identity issues and to provide a healthy living environment for youth in care. Training and education on sexual orientation and gender identity are critically important to meeting that goal. In order to dispel ignorance and misunderstanding, and to encourage adherence to existing professional best practice standards, information and guidance should be provided throughout the system.

If your agency or organization needs assistance organizing a training session, Lambda Legal can help. In 2009, Lambda Legal partnered with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) on a Train-the-Trainer initiative designed to build the capacity, awareness and skills of out-of-home care professionals serving LGBTQ youth in foster care, juvenile justice centers and homeless shelters. Master Trainers are available to facilitate trainings throughout the country. To find Master Trainers in your area or to order copies of the NASW-Lambda Legal curriculum entitled *Moving the Margins: Training Curriculum for Child Welfare Services with LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care*, by Diane Elze, Robin McHaelen, Nat'l Ass'n Soc. Workers & Lambda Legal (2009), contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTTeen (1-866-542-8336) (toll-free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at [www.lambdalegal.org/publications/moving-the-margins](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/moving-the-margins).

## CONSIDER THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF A PROSPECTIVE CAREGIVER FOR AN LGBTQ YOUTH.

Prior to placing an LGBTQ youth, child welfare practitioners should consider whether the religious beliefs of a prospective caregiver or foster or adoptive family are not in the child's best interests. Foster families may need guidance to understand the line between their obligations as caregivers and their personal religious beliefs. Where there are strong religious beliefs against LGBT people, practitioners should assess whether conflicts may arise as a result, and whether the physical or emotional safety of an LGBTQ young person may be jeopardized in that home.

## FACILITATE DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT LGBTQ ISSUES.

Child welfare policy makers should facilitate dialogue on LGBTQ issues between and among faith-based and secular child welfare service providers. By encouraging networking and other opportunities to share experiences and resources, faith-based agencies can better support one another to create more accepting and affirming systems of care. Churches and other faith-based organizations can serve as role models and mentors for agencies and individual caregivers struggling with bridging the gap between religious beliefs and professional standards of care.

“ After coming out to one of my foster families, I was told I was going to hell and forced to go to church with them. I became very closeted after that and didn't tell any other foster families I was a lesbian. I was in 22 different homes; many of them were very religious. ”

—Youth in Care



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