
INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender¹ (“LGBT”) youth in foster care² systems nationwide suffer a host of problems because of prejudice against their sexual orientation or their nonconformity to gender stereotypes. These problems range from a complete lack of recognition of their very existence and needs by child welfare systems, to insensitive and discriminatory treatment, to outright harassment and violence at the hands not only of peers or foster parents, but also of the child welfare staff responsible for their protection. This Report by Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, joined by a coalition of youth advocates, urges foster care systems and agencies to take crucial remedial steps to serve their LGBT clients.

Part I of this Report provides a background discussion of the unaddressed problems of LGBT youth in out-of-home care. Part II prescribes vital, basic measures for reform that should be adopted by child welfare systems nationwide. Finally, Part III publishes state-by-state findings and recommendations based on a survey of LGBT-related foster care policies and services in fourteen states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Montana, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Washington. This survey reveals that although a few states have taken positive first steps, none has systemwide policies and practices designed to prevent anti-gay abuse and adequately support LGBT adolescents.

For example, no state foster care agency maintains policies prohibiting discrimination against foster care youth on the basis of sexual orientation. None requires training for foster parents or foster care staff on sensitivity to LGBT youth, and only a handful of locales offer even limited optional training. Only Los Angeles and New York City maintain any group facilities specifically for LGBT youth, while few LGBT youth services can be found elsewhere in the states’ foster care systems. What emerges from this survey is a picture of nationwide neglect of LGBT youth in foster care.

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Notes to Introduction

1. "Transgender" is an umbrella term for individuals whose appearance, characteristics, or sense of their own gender identity differ from traditional sex stereotypes, regardless of the individuals' sexual orientation.
2. "Foster care" or "out-of-home care" refers broadly to placements in foster family homes, group homes, youth shelters, and institutional residences. In addition, "child welfare system" is used interchangeably for "foster care system" in this Report.