

# Working with Transgender Youth

Like all young people in care, transgender youth are entitled to bias-free attention to their unique needs and to be safe in their placements and services. They should be supported in their gender identity and never required to conform to traditional conceptions of gender in order to receive appropriate care. Child welfare professionals who work with transgender young people should be educated about transgender issues and prepared to work sensitively with these clients. Knowledge about lesbian, gay and bisexual issues may be helpful in working with transgender young people, but gender identity issues may be very different from issues related to sexual orientation.

## KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRANSGENDER AND USE THE TERM APPROPRIATELY.

**Transgender** is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity, one's inner sense of being male or female, differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. **Gender-nonconforming** people are people whose gender expression, the outward communication of gender through behavior or appearance, differs from expectations associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. **Transgender girls** are people who were assigned the sex of male at birth but identify as female. **Transgender boys** are people who were assigned the sex of female at birth but identify as male.

Everyone has both a sexual orientation and a gender identity. Gender identity is different from sexual orientation. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning.

## EDUCATE YOURSELF ON GENDER DYSPHORIA.

The incongruity between people's internal sense of self as either male or female and their anatomical or birth sex can lead to depression and severe emotional distress. When these feelings rise to clinically significant levels, a person may be suffering from gender dysphoria, a diagnosable medical condition found in the

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Treatment of gender dysphoria is focused on providing support, not changing a person's gender identity. It may include services like individual and family counseling and such medical care as hormone therapy and surgery to align the physical body with the internal sense of self as male or female. Once transgender people are able to express their gender identity, they are able to go on to lead happy, fulfilled lives. As a result, some people oppose the classification of transgender identity as a disorder, while others recognize the advantages of having explicit standards of health care for transgender individuals. All concur, however, that transgender youth need to be supported, affirmed and safe and free to express their identities.

## BE AWARE OF HEALTH CARE PROTOCOLS FOR TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health ([www.wpath.org](http://www.wpath.org)) has developed internationally recognized protocols for diagnosing and treating youth and adults with gender dysphoria. These protocols recommend that transgender young people gain real-life experience through dressing in the clothes and using names and pronouns associated with their gender identity. Young people age 16 years and older are seen as candidates for an individualized assessment for

## FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

A CWLA/Lambda Legal  
Joint Initiative



medical treatment to enable them to begin their physiological transition.

#### ALLOW TRANSGENDER YOUTH TO EXPRESS THEIR GENDER IDENTITY.

Allow transgender youth to express their gender identity through their chosen attire, hairstyles, names, mannerisms and

#### ENSURE THAT TRANSGENDER YOUTH HAVE ACCESS TO TRAINED AND AFFIRMING MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS.

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. When youth don't have access to the health care services they

“ My main concern with the social service system is the lack of understanding of transgender issues. As a transgender woman, my experiences and needs are different from gay and lesbian youth in care. ”

–Youth in Care

other physical presentations without punishment or ridicule. Don't assume that transgender youth are “acting out” when they express their gender identity. The clothing and personal style that an individual chooses are important aspects of self-expression. Support transgender youth in these choices and challenge restrictive policies that may not allow such freedom.

#### TREAT INFORMATION ABOUT A YOUTH'S GENDER IDENTITY AS CONFIDENTIAL TO ENSURE PRIVACY.

Child welfare professionals have a legal responsibility to protect

need, they may resort to buying hormones from the streets without a doctor's supervision. This can lead to serious medical injury. Transgender youth may also engage in dangerous or illegal behaviors to pay for these services.

In their official position statement affirming access to appropriate medical care for transgender people, the American Psychological Association states, “Significant and long-standing medical and psychiatric literature exists that demonstrates clear benefits of medical and surgical interventions

“ The child welfare system needs to respect the maturity of transgender young people and the decisions they make. ”

–Youth in Care

confidential information regarding youth in their care. This includes information about a youth's gender identity. At times, disclosure to foster parents, school faculty or other child welfare professionals may be necessary, such as when making decisions about a youth's housing, bathroom use, showering or health and mental health services. However, such disclosure should not be made without first obtaining the youth's permission.

#### USE YOUNG PEOPLE'S PREFERRED NAMES AND PRONOUNS.

Respect transgender young people's preferred names and gendered pronouns that best reflect their sense of self as female or male. By doing so, you validate their identity and sense of self-worth. If you're unsure which pronoun an individual youth prefers, ask sensitively rather than simply making assumptions.

#### PROTECT TRANSGENDER YOUTH FROM PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE.

Transgender youth are often at increased risk for abuse and violence by adults or other youth. Be clear that transphobic language, bias and bullying will not be tolerated, and respond to such behavior with swift and appropriate consequences. Model accepting and affirming behavior for all youth in your care.

to assist gender variant individuals seeking transition.”<sup>1</sup>

#### MAKE ROOM ASSIGNMENTS AND HOUSING DECISIONS BASED ON THE WELL-BEING OF INDIVIDUAL YOUTH.

In sex-segregated facilities, don't assign transgender youth to the girls' or boys' units strictly based on the sex assigned to them at birth. Instead, make individualized decisions based on the physical and mental well-being of the youth, their level of comfort and safety, the degree of privacy afforded, the types of housing available and the recommendations of qualified mental health professionals. The safety of transgender youth should be protected without resorting to isolating or segregating them from the general population. However, single occupancy rooms, if available, may be an acceptable alternative for transgender youth in sex-segregated facilities.

#### PROVIDE TRANSGENDER AND GENDER-NONCONFORMING YOUTH WITH PRIVACY, SAFETY AND RESPECT.

<sup>1</sup> Jack Drescher & Ellen Haller, APA Caucus of Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Psychiatrists, *Position Statement on Access to Care for Transgender and Gender Variant Individuals* (2012), available at [www.psychiatry.org/advocacy--news-room/position-statements/apa-position-statements](http://www.psychiatry.org/advocacy--news-room/position-statements/apa-position-statements).

Be prepared to make accommodations for transgender youth regarding bathroom use and showering. In these situations, the comfort and physical safety of the youth must remain an utmost priority. Allow transgender youth to shower in privacy, at a time set apart from other youth, and to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. If this option makes youth feel unsafe, they should be given access to a private, single-user bathroom.

#### ENSURE THAT TRANSGENDER YOUTH ARE SAFE IN THEIR PLACEMENTS AND SCHOOLS.

Identify and monitor appropriate placements for transgender youth that ensure their safety and provide support. Educate others involved in the placement, including child welfare

harder to find but are nonetheless crucial for their healthy development. Frequently cut off from their families of origin, and part of a misunderstood minority, transgender young people can find a sense of family and belonging from mentors and community role models.

#### LOCATE AND DEVELOP RESOURCES TO HELP TRANSGENDER YOUNG PEOPLE WITH UNIQUE LEGAL ISSUES.

Transgender young people may need assistance and advocacy to obtain proper legal identity documents like birth certificates, state identification cards and driver licenses that reflect the gender with which they identify. They may also need help to obtain legal name changes. Child welfare systems have the responsibility to locate and help develop these resources for

// Adolescents may be eligible for puberty-suppressing hormones as soon as pubertal changes have begun... Adolescents may be eligible to begin feminizing/masculinizing hormone therapy, preferably with parental consent. //

–Standards of Care, World Professional Association for Transgender Health

professionals, other youth and foster parents, to create an environment that is accepting and respectful of transgender youth. In situations where sleeping arrangements are dictated by gender, create an individualized housing plan that takes into account the youth's wishes as well as their physical and mental well-being.

Transgender youth often face serious safety challenges at school. It is important that transgender youth be placed in schools that will affirm their gender identities. Be prepared to advocate on behalf of transgender youth to ensure that their gender identities are respected. Work with school staff to address use of names and pronouns, clothing and grooming options, bathroom and locker room use and other accommodations.

#### AVOID ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT TRANSGENDER YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

Sexual orientation is separate and different from gender identity. Transgender young people may identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or something else. Learn to differentiate between sexual orientation and gender identity and to comfortably use relevant terminology. Understand that sexual orientation and gender identity are aspects of a person's core understanding of themselves.

#### PROVIDE TRANSGENDER-FRIENDLY ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS.

Transgender youth, like all youth, need connections to adult role models and mentors. For transgender young people in out-of-home care systems, these positive connections can be

transgender young people in their care.

#### PROVIDE SUPPORT IN FINDING EMPLOYMENT.

Transgender youth face especially steep barriers to employment. Finding employment is even more complicated for those transgender youth whose identity documents do not match their chosen names and gender expression. Without adequate educational and job training opportunities, they're at a further disadvantage. Transgender young people aging out of child welfare systems can be left with few options other than to engage in illegal and harmful activities in order to survive. Meaningful opportunities should be offered to transgender young people for education, job training and legal employment.

#### FURTHER READING:

Lambda Legal, *Transgender Rights Tool Kit: A Legal Guide for Trans People and Their Advocates* (2011), available at [www.lambdalegal.org/publications/trans-toolkit](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/trans-toolkit).

Lambda Legal & Nat'l Youth Advocacy Coal., *Bending the Mold: An Action Kit for Transgender Students* (2009), available at [www.lambdalegal.org/publications/bending-the-mold](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/bending-the-mold).

Jody Marksamer, Dean Spade & Gabriel Arkles, Nat'l Ctr. for Lesbian Rights & Sylvia Rivera Law Project, *A Place of Respect: A Guide for Group Care Facilities Serving Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth* (2011), available at [www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/A\\_Place\\_Of\\_Respect.pdf?docID=8301](http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/A_Place_Of_Respect.pdf?docID=8301).

## RESOURCES FOR TRANSGENDER YOUTH:

### LAMBDA LEGAL

[www.lambdalegal.org/issues/transgender-rights](http://www.lambdalegal.org/issues/transgender-rights)

“NASW recognizes that there is considerable diversity in gender expression and identity among our population and believes that people of diverse gender—including those sometimes called ‘transgender’—should be afforded the same respect and rights as any other person... A nonjudgmental attitude toward gender diversity enables social workers to provide maximum support and services to those whose gender departs from the expected norm. ”

—National Association of Social Workers

120 Wall Street, 19th Floor  
New York, NY 10005  
Phone: 212-809-8585  
Email: [cwla.lambda.network@lambdalegal.org](mailto:cwla.lambda.network@lambdalegal.org)

### GAY & LESBIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

[www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org)  
1326 18th Street NW, Suite 22  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-600-8037  
Email: [info@glma.org](mailto:info@glma.org)

### NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSGENDER EQUALITY

[www.transequality.org](http://www.transequality.org)



#### Lambda Legal

120 Wall Street, 19th Floor  
New York, NY 10005  
866-LGBTeen or 212-809-8585  
[www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)



#### Child Welfare League of America

1726 M Street NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-688-4200  
[www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)