



**Faith *Forward***

**Faith-based Approaches to Addressing and Preventing  
LGBTQ Youth Homelessness**

**Part One (pre-publication)**

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*Please note: this is a pre-publication copy, released for use while the manuscript is being prepared for publication. If you have recommendations, suggestions, resources or any other feedback, please send them to [info@parity.nyc](mailto:info@parity.nyc)*

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## **About Parity:**

Parity is a national nonprofit based in New York City that works at the intersection of LGBTQia and faith. Learn more at [parity.nyc](http://parity.nyc)

### **LGBTQia and Allied Youth**

We provide programming, support and pastoral care to LGBTQ youth who are outside as well as within faith communities, and as instruction, mentoring and education for clergy, congregations, denominational leaders and non-profit organizations to help prevent and address LGBTQ youth homelessness and suicide. Our family education workshops and programs provide a framework for faith-based help and supports for LGBTQ youth, even within rejecting families and faiths.

### **Emerging LGBTQ Pastors and Clergy**

We mentor emerging LGBTQ pastors from all over the United States as they navigate the process of ordination through fellowship, worship and training. Starting in 2015 we began welcoming recently ordained LGBTQ pastors so we may support them in their growth in the Church. For over a decade, we have created open spaces, both physically and spiritually, where people are welcomed and supported, where skills and stories can be shared, and community created.

### **Advocating and Educating for Social Change**

We work with diverse communities of faith to provide pastoral care, outreach and educational activities designed to engage and unite congregations, clergy, and lay leaders along the journey to full LGBTQ equality. We are always eager to facilitate conversations in congregations seeking to deepen and broaden their witness to LGBTQ people.

Our renowned annual public witness initiative, Glitter Ash Wednesday, achieved international notice and success, from outside of the Stonewall Inn to the United Kingdom and beyond. Glitter Ash Wednesday provides an opportunity for faith communities to do outreach to LGBTQ and allied people as well as an affirmation of faith identity for LGBTQ people and a witness to the world that being LGBTQ **does not** prevent someone having faith and a relationship with God.

Our partner-based Bridging Conversations Program provides education and mentoring for people wishing to engage across difference to advance social causes. This growing, faith-based, national initiative has resulted in legislative change that helps prevent suicide and homelessness for LGBTQ youth.

### **About the authors:**



**Rev. Marian Edmonds-Allen** is the executive director of Parity. Marian is a Petra Fellow, nationally recognized for her work with LGBTQ homeless youth in conservative areas and the 2014 Q Salt Lake Person of the Year in Utah. During her years as an LGBTQ youth center director she helped thousands of LGBTQ youth and their families to not only survive, but thrive.

In the past several years she has expanded on that work to empower LGBTQ youth to explore faith, and to help faith communities and churches to prevent and address LGBTQ youth suicide and homelessness within their congregations and local communities. Marian particularly enjoys her work bringing together organizations of vastly different ideologies to promote health and wellness of LGBTQ youth and their families. This work with very diverse people has resulted in legislative results that are not only encouraging, but also life-saving.

Marian is former National Program Director of the Family Acceptance Project, former Executive Director of OUTreach Resource Centers and the Utah Pride Center. Marian is currently the Executive Director of Parity, a Justice Ministry Education Supervisor with Auburn Seminary and in the Doctor of Ministry program at Eden Theological Seminary. She is a former church planter and has served in a variety of pastoral, chaplaincy and ministry roles.



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# Chapter One: Introduction

Every youth experiencing homelessness has a unique story and the reasons youth find themselves on the street are varied. Many LGBTQ youth become homeless for economic reasons - their families simply don't have enough money to provide shelter and food for them. In some cases, adolescent youth are driven from their home of origin by the feeling that they are a burden on an already economically stretched family. Some LGBTQ youth run away from physical, sexual and verbal abuse they may or may not be related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. Others are kicked out by their parents or caregivers, told "Come back when you have straightened up."

Let's pause here. This is unbelievable, right? Parents don't kick their kids out for being LGBTQ, right? Parents DO kick their kids out for being (or even appearing as though they might be) LGBTQ. About half of the youth experiencing homelessness that we have worked with had been kicked out by parents from traditional (not LGBTQ-affirming) religions and faiths. Two important and unexpected points to note:

First, **none of these parents hated their child.** In fact, all of the parents we worked with thought they were doing the best thing they could for their child. Some had been advised by a religious leader to kick their child out (often to minimize

contact with younger, “easily influenced” siblings), others simply thought it would impress upon the child the need to “straighten up”, to “get over it.”

Second, **not a single one - not ONE - of the hundreds of homeless youth we worked with ever expressed anything but love and longing for their parents and families.** Even after being physically or sexually abused, or being told horrific things, like “I wish you had never been born,” youth defend their parents. In fact, youth often said that they didn’t want anyone to know they had been kicked out, they didn’t want their parents to get in trouble! The irony, of course, is that in many states that value parents rights over children, a parent will not get in trouble but the kicked out child can be arrested.

The good news hidden here is that often, with education and support, families can learn and grow together, becoming a facilitator of positive development for their LGBTQ youth. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to provide this education and support to families. For other LGBTQ youth, positive interaction with their family of origin (or foster family, extended family, etc.) is not possible. For these youth in particular, contact with accepting, affirming, and empathetic adults is absolutely critical. Creating a community and safe space for these youth literally *saves lives*. And you have the ability to do just this. Keep reading.

## Chapter Two: Background and Need

Although being an LGBTQ person in itself does not *cause* a youth to become homeless, attempt suicide, or find themselves in perilous situations, LGBTQ youth are disproportionately represented in all the above. To understand why LGBTQ youth are at high risk for negative outcomes, it's important to understand a couple of concepts:

First, being LGBTQ is *not a choice*. According to the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Medical Association, and American Academy of Pediatrics, sexual orientation and gender identity are *not* choices. It is dangerous to think of them as choices because this implies that they can be changes. Conversion therapy and all other efforts to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity are unethical. In fact, subjecting an LGBTQ youth to conversion therapy significantly increases their likelihood of attempting suicide. For more information, see *Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth*, a report from the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2015). *Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 15-4928. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from: <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA15-4928/SMA15-4928.pdf>

Second, the day-to-day lived experiences of LGBTQ youth and their interactions (or lack thereof) with others at home, in school, and in their congregations and communities are critical influences on youth outcomes including homelessness. Depending on the nature of these interactions and the way youth feel in the following hours and days, simple exchanges and conversations can act either as protective factors, increasing youths' self-esteem and buffering them from negative outcomes, or as risk factors, contributing to the likelihood that a youth will have thoughts of suicide or engage in high-risk behaviors. For all LGBTQ youth, but especially for those who experience bullying, family rejection, and/or homelessness, exposure to supportive community and positive interactions with caring adults can make all the difference.

Each year, an estimated 1 - 1.7 million youth experience homelessness in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> This is roughly 5 - 8 percent of all youth. This includes youth who "run away" from home (often to escape abuse), youth who are kicked out by their parent(s) or guardian(s), youth who were formerly homeless with a parent, and youth who leave or age out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems. In each of these subgroups, LGBTQ youth are over-represented. By some estimates, 1 in every 5

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<sup>2</sup> Fernandez-Alcantara, A.L. (2013). *Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics and Programs*. Congressional Research Service CRS Report for Congress. Retrieved from: [http://www.nchcw.org/uploads/7/5/3/3/7533556/crs\\_2013\\_rhya\\_history\\_and\\_lit\\_review.pdf](http://www.nchcw.org/uploads/7/5/3/3/7533556/crs_2013_rhya_history_and_lit_review.pdf)



youth experiencing homelessness (20 percent) identifies as LGBTQ.<sup>3</sup> In our experience, the percentage of youth experiencing homelessness who identify as LGBTQ may be even higher, particularly in regions where conservative Christian faiths are predominant.

One reason LGBTQ youth are over-represented among youth experiencing homelessness is family rejection.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 4 (Preventing Youth Homelessness) will explain why family acceptance is key in preventing LGBTQ youth homelessness, and why faith communities and faith leaders are uniquely positioned to educate and support families in accepting (and embracing) their LGBTQ child. Faith communities have the power to keep youth from landing on the street in the first place, which is *absolutely crucial* considering the reality of a youth's experience of homelessness.

Immediately upon becoming homeless, youth are exposed to trauma, often daily. While attempting to survive on the street, youth are at constant risk for physical and sexual abuse, exploitation, and becoming victims of sex trafficking.<sup>5</sup> Rates of victimization are high for all youth experiencing homelessness, but LGBTQ

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<sup>3</sup> Lambda Legal, National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Network for Youth, & National Center for Lesbian Rights (2009). *National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth*. Retrieved from: [https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl\\_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth\\_0.pdf](https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, C. (2014). Generating a revolution in prevention, wellness & care for LGBT children & youth. *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review*, 23(2) 331-344. Retrieved from: [https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc\\_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf](https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2009). *Homeless Youth and Sexual Exploitation: Research Findings and Practice Implications*. Retrieved from: [https://b3cdn.net/naeh/c0103117f1ee8f2d84\\_e8m6ii5q2.pdf](https://b3cdn.net/naeh/c0103117f1ee8f2d84_e8m6ii5q2.pdf)

homeless youth are victims of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence during their lifetime than than straight, cis-gender homeless peers.<sup>6</sup>

These experiences of trauma and victimization, when combined with basic needs going unmet (and the resulting survival mindset), lack of opportunity, and absence of a supportive community, contribute to *entrenchment* for youth experiencing homelessness. Youth in this entrenched state are unable to see themselves exiting homelessness, which would require addressing seemingly insurmountable barriers related to mental health, addiction, education and employment, and utter lack of social capital and supports.<sup>7</sup> It's easy for a person in this situation to feel hopeless and the stress of surviving on the street can lead to the development or exacerbation of mental illnesses, particularly for LGBTQ homeless youth. One study found that LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness were significantly more likely to attempt suicide (*62 percent*) than their straight, cis-gender peers experiencing homelessness (*29 percent*).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cochran, B., Stewart, B., Ginzler, J. and Cauce, A. (2002). Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: Comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(5), 773-777.

<sup>7</sup> Noble, C., Edmonds Allen, M., Edmonds Allen, T., Peterson, R., & Noble, C. *Operation Safety Net Bootcamp Training*, Salt Lake City, UT. 2016, August.

<sup>8</sup> Van Leeuwen, J.M. et al. (2006). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth: An eight city public health perspective. *Child Welfare*, 85(2), 151-170.

To learn more about preventing suicide among LGBTQ youth, our free publication *Faith-Based Approaches to LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention*<sup>9</sup> can be accessed here: <http://parity.nyc/suicideprevention/>

So, what can *you* do to prevent and address LGBTQ youth homelessness? What can *your faith community* do to prevent and address LGBTQ youth homelessness? Before we get into the specifics of *what* you can do, let's talk for just a moment about ***why*** churches and faith communities are so important in this conversation.

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<sup>9</sup> Edmonds Allen, M. (2018). *Faith Forward: Faith Based Approached to LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention*. NYC: Parity. Retrieved from: <http://parity.nyc/s/FaithForwardSuicidePreventionPrePub.pdf>

## **Chapter Three: Why Churches and Faith Communities?**

When we were brand new LGBTQ youth center directors we heard almost every day that “queer youth won’t set foot in a church.” We readily believed that - it made sense, after all, wounded LGBTQ people didn’t want anything to do with religion or God. We began talking to the youth center board about finding a non-religious space so that we could raise our attendance.

Searching for a suitable, affordable space is slow business, so months later we were still in the church, and we were still hearing how LGBTQ youth would surely stay away. Actually, our numbers, after a dip, began to creep upwards. Surprising, since we were still in the basement education rooms of a church. As the search dragged on we stopped thinking about why youth wouldn’t attend, and started noticing why they DID.

Our needs assessment results were in, and while we noticed that youth wished for a big space downtown, near the movie theater and fast food restaurants, they were attending our program regularly, even though it was in a residential neighborhood. Eight months after we started, we were full - meaning we discovered that we could handle 60 youth at a time in our space, and then it became too crowded. The youth sorted themselves out, some arriving early, some late, so that

we had a constant 60 youth at a time, about 800 youth per month. In a rural town, in a neighborhood, in the basement of a church. When someone says “Youth won’t come to a church,” tell them the story. All things are possible, even at a faith space.

Besides McDonalds’s and Starbucks, what is a ubiquitous presence in almost every town, even those towns too small for a Mickey D’s? Yes, you guessed it - a worship space, usually a church or synagogue in the United States, or other variety of worship / faith space. In every community there often are gas stations, convenience and stores, too, maybe, but almost always some type of church/faith space.

In that church (and we use the term “church” to mean a faith-oriented space of any religion) you will find rest rooms, often a kitchen, a recreation room or gym (sometimes with a stage!) and usually classrooms, too. Often the church is near the center of town, it is clean, comfortable, predictable, and maybe there are already community groups that meet there - a women’s club, boy scouts, Al-Anon. Church space is often community space. The people are usually kind and caring (not always, let’s be honest here) and most often there is a heart for helping people in need. There are volunteers available, there may even be one or more queer youth that attend there, maybe a same gender couple, or some grandparents of a transgender youth.

This faith space is also ideal beyond space considerations (read more about space in the “Assessing Capacity” section of Chapter 6). Faith communities almost always (we could probably go for it and just say ALWAYS) are looking for new members, particularly young members. You aren’t starting an outreach for LGBTQ youth to get them or their parents / families to attend your church, but they just might. Something to keep in mind. Also, so much of the homophobia and transphobia in the United States is due to religious attitudes and faith-related discrimination. Wouldn’t it be an appropriate and laudable act for faith communities to be on the front lines of helping keep LGBTQ youth alive and safe?

# Chapter Four: Preventing Youth Homelessness

## Why is prevention *so* important?

Imagine you are standing at the bottom of a waterfall. As you stand there, you see young people falling from the top, some splashing and swimming to shore, but most never surfacing again. Alarmed, you rush to the top to help stop these young people from falling! You don't want another youth or child to fall from the top, to maybe swim and survive, but mostly not.

Youth who become homeless are generally contacted by a sex trafficker during their first days on the street.<sup>10</sup> Traffickers are quick to recognize a vulnerable, newly homeless youth and to view them as an easy profit. One in five youth experiencing homelessness are victims of human trafficking, and the rate of sex trafficking for LGBTQ youth is *twice* that of their straight, cis-gender peers.<sup>11</sup> As you may recall from Chapter 2, LGBTQ homeless youth are also victims of significantly more acts of sexual violence on the street.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, J. Biker's Urban Response Needed: Youth Trafficking in Utah. *Utah Coalition to End Youth Homelessness Meeting*, Salt Lake City, UT. 2014, November.

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, L.T. (2017). *Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten-City Study Executive Summary*. New Orleans, LA: Modern Slavery Research Project, Loyola University. Retrieved from: <https://covenanthousestudy.org/landing/trafficking/docs/Loyola-Research-Results.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Cochran, B., Stewart, B., Ginzler, J. and Cauce, A. (2002). Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: Comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(5), 773-777.

LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are frequently the victims of physical assault and hate crimes.<sup>13</sup> Homeless youth also experience illness, injury, and (sometimes fatal) health issues on the street at a disproportionate rate<sup>14</sup> as a result of factors including constant exposure to the elements, inadequate diet, and lack of access to health care.<sup>15</sup> High-risk drug use and addiction are also common among LGBTQ homeless youth.<sup>16</sup> And this doesn't touch on the above-mentioned fact that **62%** of LGBTQ youth reported having attempted suicide at least once.<sup>17</sup>

A youth who becomes homeless is lucky if they survive at all, and if they do survive, many have life-long difficulties with post traumatic stress and/or other mental illness, physical illness, economic and legal liabilities, lack of education and employability, lack of family, community, and social supports...and on and on.

As one homeless youth put it, "Loss is the law on the streets."<sup>18</sup> Once a youth has experienced this level of loss (loss of family or origin, loss of safety, security, and

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<sup>13</sup> Cochran, B., Stewart, B., Ginzler, J. and Cauce, A. (2002). Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: Comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(5), 773-777.

<sup>14</sup> Beharry, M.S. (2012). Health Issues in the Homeless Youth Population. *Pediatric Annals* 41(4), 154-156.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Health Resources & Service Administration. (2001). *Understanding the Health Care Needs of Homeless Youth*. Retrieved from: <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/archive/policiesregulations/policies/pal200110.html>

<sup>16</sup> Hyatt, S. (2011). *Struggling to Survive: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Homeless Youth on the Streets of California*. Sacramento, CA: California Homeless Youth Project. Retrieved from: <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/strugglingtosurvivefinal.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Van Leeuwen, J.M. et al. (2006). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth: An eight city public health perspective. *Child Welfare*, 85(2), 151-170.

<sup>18</sup> Katia. (2008, June 27). Retrieved from: [iamkatia.blogspot.com](http://iamkatia.blogspot.com)



possessions, loss of beloved friends and animals, the loss of feelings of self-worth that come with sexual exploitation, etc.), once a youth has been in a survival mindset, which is *necessary* and *adaptive* on the street where safety, food, and sleep are never guaranteed, it can feel impossible to *come back*. To come out of that trapped, hopeless place we call *entrenchment*,<sup>19</sup> a youth must unlearn the patterns of thinking that are adaptive on the street but can make functioning among the larger, housed community difficult or impossible. For example, a youth's experiences on the street can lead to a sense that there is no predictability or control over their circumstances. Because loss is the law, they begin to see everything as impermanent, which can lead them to behave in ways that would be interpreted by many as irresponsible, impulsive, or erratic. It is important to reiterate that the views and behaviors that comprise *street culture* are adaptive and even *necessary* on the street. But these same views and behaviors create an enormous barrier for a youth who desires to exit homelessness, obtain employment, and integrate into their broader community. For more on street culture, see the Highly Recommended Groundwork section in Chapter 5. JT Fest's book *Street Culture 2.0* is an excellent, more comprehensive resource we recommend for those wanting to develop cultural competency in working with youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Noble, C., Edmonds Allen, M., Edmonds Allen, T., Peterson, R., & Noble, C. *Operation Safety Net Bootcamp Training*, Salt Lake City, UT. 2016, August.

<sup>20</sup> Fest, J.T. (2014). *Street Culture 2.0: An Epistemology of Street-Dependent Youth*.

Let's help those youth who are homeless. They *need* us. AND let's do our very best to KEEP youth from becoming homeless, ever. Think about what it would be like to be told that you have five minutes to say good bye to your family and pets, to put whatever you can in a backpack, and walk out the door. Where would you go? What if you were 17, or maybe 12? With your cell phone, perhaps - but probably not. And when a seemingly friendly stranger asks you at 10:00 that night if you need a place to sleep, or a hamburger, what will you do?

### **What can faith communities do to prevent LGBTQ youth homelessness?**

Though the reasons youth become homeless are varied, there are patterns in the experiences that lead (or push!) youth on to the street. Looking at both the reasons youth become homeless *and* the reasons many LGBTQ youth do *not* become homeless can help faith communities develop clear strategies for preventing youth homelessness. Churches and faith communities sit at the *top* of the waterfall. *You* can keep youth from falling. This section presents three of the most common reasons youth become homeless and ideas for faith communities to address each of these core causes: 1) economic disadvantage, 2) abuse and domestic violence, and 3) family rejection.

It's important to know that people - including youth - often become homeless for economic reasons. For youth, parents may be unable to provide financial support or meet the basic needs of their children for a variety of reasons. LGBTQ homeless

youth face significant barriers to employment and often lack the “safety net” of family, extended family, friends, and supportive adults that some youth rely on (financially and otherwise) as they learn to navigate adulthood.

So, what can faith communities do? Your church may have monetary help for people and families in need - if so, great! If not (and in addition to) find out what agencies, organizations and non-profits in your area can help people meet their basic needs (and who they serve - age limits, etc.). If you get a call or a knock on your door that someone doesn't have a place to sleep - what will you tell them? Make a plan using the resources that are available to you, even if they are limited. Know - and post - a resource list for housing, clothing, food and utilities assistance. Invite representatives of nonprofits and government agencies to talk to your congregation so that everyone knows where to get help for themselves and for people they know.

Other common reasons youth become homeless are child abuse and domestic violence. Clergy and faith leaders say over and over how glad they are to have learned about domestic violence and abuse, and have talked about it in worship services, educational events, or community events. They describe people coming to talk to them that they had NO idea were in need of help. Research shows as many as one out of every four children in the United States experiences some

form of child maltreatment.<sup>21</sup> You don't even know who in your congregation needs help - so learn what is in your community and talk about it. Invite representatives from local organizations that prevent and address child abuse and domestic violence to come and give an educational event. You can make it low-barrier and non-threatening - "Come and and learn how to help our neighbors to keep our communities safe." Research the supports and resources available in your area for survivors of abuse and domestic violence, then post these resources and contact information for local service providers in places where members of your faith community will see. Better yet, do a little research (call and ask a few questions) to see whether services are safe and welcoming to families who are led by LGBTQ people, and for LGBTQ children.

The final cause of LGBTQ youth homelessness we'll discuss, family rejection, is an area where faith communities have the potential to make a profound positive impact on LGBTQ youth through equipping their families with knowledge and support. Family rejection has been shown to directly impact rates of suicide attempts, depression, substance abuse, HIV, *and* homelessness among LGBTQ youth.<sup>22</sup> The inverse of family rejection, family *acceptance*, significantly contributes

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<sup>21</sup> Finkelhor, D., Turner, H.A., Ormond, R., & Hamby, S.L. (2013). Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: An update. *JAMA Pediatric*, 167(7), 614-621.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan, C. (2014). Generating a revolution in prevention, wellness & care for LGBT children & youth. *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review*, 23(2) 331-344. Retrieved from: [https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc\\_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf](https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf)

to youths' perceptions of social support, the development of self-esteem, having a positive view of the future, and a sense of life satisfaction.<sup>23</sup>

What do we mean by family *rejection*? What about family *acceptance*? To understand these terms (and how to prevent youth homelessness through increasing family acceptance), we refer you to the gold standard - the award-winning best-practice, The Family Acceptance Project. The Family Acceptance Project is the brainchild of Dr. Caitlin Ryan, a researcher, social worker and devout Catholic. Dr. Ryan worked with dying young men in Atlanta during the AIDS crisis, and saw the devastation caused by broken family relationships. She made it her life's work to help families stay together, to help parents and caregivers to have the tools to not only love their LGBTQ children, but also to promote their health and wellness. Her work shows that by learning how to effectively communicate and interact with LGBTQ children, those children will be less likely to attempt suicide, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to engage in risky behaviors, to contract HIV, and **less likely to become homeless.**

Remember the high percentage of LGBTQ youth kicked out by their parents, most often for religious reasons? This is your wheelhouse. You can speak directly TO that, and you know what, if you don't some people might even assume that because you are a faith leader, you might be in favor of kicking out a child for being

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<sup>23</sup> Ryan, C. (2014). Generating a revolution in prevention, wellness & care for LGBT children & youth. *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review*, 23(2) 331-344. Retrieved from: [https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc\\_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf](https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/Ryanc_Wellness%2CPrevention%20%26%20Care%20for%20LGBT%20Youth-fn.pdf)

LGBTQ. If you think children to stay in the home, with loving families, say so, and help those families help their children.

There are easy ways to adopt the Family Acceptance Project as part of the culture and practices of faith communities of all types, denominations and religions. What I especially love about it is that it is cross-cultural and cross-belief systems - it's about behaviors, not beliefs. For example, if a mom of a LGBTQ child believes that being gay is sinful, no one has to try to convince her to change that belief. Her belief isn't important here - only that it be respected. What *is* important is that she interacts and communicates with her child in scientifically proven ways to help keep her child safe and feeling loved and supported. These behaviors are often common sense and are easy to learn and teach others. It's as close to perfect as can be.

So...how can you incorporate the Family Acceptance Project to your faith community? Here are a few ideas:

### **Read the Family Acceptance Project booklets**

The booklets are available for free to download from the website [www.familyacceptanceproject.org](http://www.familyacceptanceproject.org). They are available in English, Spanish and Chinese and come in multi-faith as well as religion specific versions (currently a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and more will be added). You may wish to consider ordering hard copies of the booklets - they are high quality and meant for

use and sharing. This is an excellent resource to have available to give to a parent or family member, or even another faith leader.

### **Screen a film**

The Family Acceptance Project has a film series that tells the story of moving from struggle to acceptance. The films are multicultural and multi-faith, are short (25 minutes) and include a discussion guide. We have used them in professional, faith, youth, small group and large group settings. Sometimes with a panel of parents and children, sometimes with a faith leader speaking, or a mental health professional or pediatrician. The possibilities are endless, and what is particularly meaningful for people is to see another family's story and have an opportunity to listen to others, and to ask questions. Having some affirming organizations at your event is a plus (your local PFLAG, GSA, LGBTQ affirming organization or center, health department) and resources for youth and families and opportunities to connect are invaluable, life-changing, even life-saving.

### **Go to a training or arrange for a training**

Dr. Caitlin Ryan travels the world giving presentations and trainings. Email or visit the website ([www.familyacceptanceproject.org/](http://www.familyacceptanceproject.org/)) to learn where she will be.

Arranging for her to speak to faith leaders and congregants in your area is an

excellent idea, and can make all the difference in affirming LGBTQ youth in your community.

### **Create a parent support group**

Start a group for parents of LGBTQ youth in your community to talk about supporting LGBTQ youth in the home, in schools, and in your faith community using Family Acceptance Project principles and other best practices. You *could* create a group for LGBTQ youth at the same time - how fun!



# **Chapter Five:**

## **Addressing Youth Homelessness**

### **Part 1: Quick Tips & Easy Projects**

The old adage, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” holds particularly true when it comes to youth homelessness. Knowing the trauma youth experience on the street, knowing that “Loss is the law on the street,” it is critical that we do as much as we can to prevent youth homelessness. Even so, there will always be youth who experience housing instability and homelessness. And these youth are in need - not only in need of food, shelter from weather, and clothing - but in desperate need of a safe space where they can let their guard down, an adult they can trust, and a community that accepts and celebrates them as they are.

This chapter presents ideas on starting where you are as a faith community, doing whatever you can *now*, whether or not you plan to open a drop-in space for youth in the future. Several ideas follow, some of which may be a good fit for your faith community, both to provide compassionate service to youth in need, and to begin laying groundwork for collaboration with other local organizations and/or faith communities. Engaging your congregation in these types of projects provides a catalyst to conversations about youth homelessness and other issues faced by LGBTQ youth in your community, both within your faith community and between your faith community and outside partners who also serve youth experiencing homelessness. Below are several ideas for simple projects that will immediately have a positive impact on youth in your community.

### **Project 1: Assemble Hygiene Kits**

Gather donations and construct hygiene kits for youth experiencing homelessness to donate to a local youth serving organization.

#### **Why is this important?**

1. The act of gathering together supplies for a youth who is living on the street, in a squat or camp breaks open the hearts of people involved. It all becomes *real*.
2. Carefully constructed, these kits can be of real use to youth. Those of us who have been on the service provision side have been known to cringe at supplies that are seemingly dumped as a tax write-off. But we will help you create good kits that will be well received and used.
3. You will be educating everyone as you ask for supplies, put them together, bring them to your local service provider. Your faith community will learn more about youth homelessness, your local service providers will see that people of faith care and DO.

### **How to do this:**

1. Call or email a local youth homelessness provider and ask what they need. Tell them you want to create hygiene kits, and ask what is most needed for those. They may have a list to share with you, or they may gently suggest you help with other needs that they have.
2. Call or email your local school district and ask for the McKinney Vento Representative (the person designated by the district to ensure that the needs of homeless students are met). Each school has services for youth experiencing homelessness, and they all have needs for various items including hygiene kits, school supplies, warm coats, and so on. Ask what they need.
3. You may decide you want the hygiene kits kept at your church or building for use as they are needed. Some people keep them in their car and pass them out when they see a youth panhandling add fresh fruit or a sandwich to the kit.

Here are some often requested items to potentially include in hygiene kits:

- Water bottle or bottled water
- Pouches of chicken
- Pouches of dried fruit and nuts
- Chocolate bars - high quality if possible for more nutrients
- NEW socks (unisex)

- A small, new journal or notebook and a sharpie
- Travel size body wash, deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush, lip balm
- Sanitary supplies
- Small amount gift card for fast food, Walmart, local grocery store, etc.
- A handwritten note with a supportive, nonsectarian message. Below is an example of what it might look like, just be careful to not be personal or reveal private information: “Hi, I’m a member of \_\_\_\_\_ (or just say “a local faith community” and I packed this kit for you. I can’t imagine what it is like for you right now. I will be thinking of you and hope that you stay well and safe. We care about you. (don’t use your name when you sign - but close in a way that feels comfortable) Sending a hug, A Friend.”
- Pack it in a reusable draw string bag. Some churches/faith communities pack their kits in backpacks twice each year - that is an option, too.

### **Project 2: Hold an Educational Event**

Have an educational event at your church or faith community.

#### **Why is this important?**

Many people have no idea that children and youth experience homelessness in the United States - and surely not in their own community. The reality is very different, and when people know about youth homelessness, they want to do something to help. This energy will help your local homelessness organizations, LGBTQ organizations, and most important, help prevent and address youth homelessness.

#### **How to do this:**

You may know someone who works with LGBTQ youth or works in the youth homelessness field. If you don’t know someone, call or visit your local LGBTQ

center, homeless youth shelter (or service provider) and ask who they recommend. If your community doesn't have such services, you can ask someone else - a representative from the local housing authority or health department, a librarian, an educator who supports students experiencing homelessness (every school district has a McKinney Vento Liaison, responsible for meeting the needs of homeless students), or an adult who experienced homelessness as a youth who is willing to share their story. You can ask for a presentation, you could arrange for a panel of local experts, or you could screen a film about youth homelessness and facilitate a discussion.

Providing this experience for members of your faith community conveys critical information *and* can serve to build momentum around an LGBTQ youth and/or homeless youth ministry. We've found that once faith communities become aware of youth homelessness from standpoints of both facts and statistics *and* the stories of lived experiences of homeless youth, they are invested and committed to creating positive change for these youth.

Your event is an opportunity for not only your congregation - you could make it open to the public, perhaps partner with organizations to promote, staff and provide refreshments. You could even welcome local service providers in tabling or speaking briefly about their work to help LGBTQ youth. You could send out a press release so that more people learn about LGBTQ youth homelessness.

### **Project 3: Offer LGBTQ Affirming Family Counseling**

Create a safe space for respectful conversations where parents are equipped with information and strategies to support their child, and where family healing can occur.

#### **Why is this important?**

LGBTQ youth need a loving family home as much as any child - but transphobia and homophobia often disrupt family relationships, even when those attitudes are outside of the family itself. Parents also have to “come out” as having a LGBTQ child. It’s a lot of pressure and stress at times - and faith leaders can provide a listening and supportive presence that helps everyone. Supporting families is critical in preventing LGBTQ youth homelessness.

#### **How to do this:**

Learn about issues impacting families with LGBTQ children and youth. Become familiar with the literature and best practices. The very best resources are once again from the Family Acceptance Project: [https://nccc.georgetown.edu/documents/LGBT\\_Brief.pdf](https://nccc.georgetown.edu/documents/LGBT_Brief.pdf). We also suggest having Family Acceptance Project booklets on hand to share with parents and youth: [www.familyacceptanceproject.org](http://www.familyacceptanceproject.org).

Other helpful resources for supporting LGBTQ youth and their families include:

- Human Rights Campaign Religion and Faith Section: <http://www.hrc.org/topics/religion-faith> (This website includes extensive resources, especially note the “Christian Conversation Guide.”)
- National LGBTQ Task Force Website: <http://www.welcomingresources.org/index.htm> (Extensive, interdenominational resources that are a go-to for information on the intersection of faith and LGBTQ.)
- Unitarian Universalist Association’s Resource List: <http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/> (The UUA has a long history of LGBTQ inclusion, a robust network, and especially good religious education curriculum with a healthy, holistic view of sexuality - Our Whole Lives.)
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). *A Practitioner’s Resource Guide Helping Families to Support their LGBT Children*. Download at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/PEP14-LGBTKIDS/PEP14-LGBTKIDS.pdf>
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2015). *Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth*. Download at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA15-4928/SMA15-4928.pdf>

Besides equipping yourself with cultural competency and information, it is worthwhile to research and create a list of organizations and groups (both local and national) that support LGBTQ youth and families that you can provide to families who approach you with questions or for council - read more about this below in the “Highly Recommended Groundwork” section.

### **Project 4: Connect & Create Community for Parents & Families**

Connect affirming families and parents of LGBTQ youth informally and/or create a family group

#### **Why is this important?**

Parents who have an LGBTQ child have a journey to make. They don't always see where this journey will lead, and may have fear about the uncertainty. Listening to other parents of LGBTQ children (especially those who struggled with acceptance initially and learned to embrace and support their child) speak about their journeys, and having a chance to share feelings and ask questions, can be invaluable in making parents feel connected rather than isolated. Having connection to an empathetic, understanding community helps both parents *and* their children feel affirmed and supported. And these connections can save lives.

#### **How to do this:**

Your approach to connecting parents and families depends on the size of your faith community and the number of families you know with LGBTQ youth. Perhaps some parents you know come to mind as you read this, parents who accept and do their best to support their LGBTQ child. If this is the case, consider approaching these parents to take a leadership role in mentoring and supporting other parents of LGBTQ youth. If you are aware of several parents or families, involve them in planning a weekly or monthly parent meet up or family night. Listen to the families you work with and consider their specific needs, then empower them to create a sustainable group that meets their needs, offering space or resources to support them as you are able. One example is Family Fellowship, a group for Mormon parents and families with LGBTQ children (see <http://www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org/>).



### **Project 5: Host Monthly Meals and/or Events for Youth**

Have a monthly (or weekly!) meal for youth with a fun program, or hold a special event, making sure it is welcoming for all youth (not just LGBTQ identified)

#### **Why is this important?**

In Chapter 2, we discussed the importance of day-to-day interactions that LGBTQ youth experience and the profound effects these interactions (or lack of) have on youth outcomes, for better or worse. For *all* LGBTQ youth, but particularly for those who struggle to find acceptance and support at home, at school, or in their own church or faith community, the presence of an affirming, welcoming group and one or more trusted adult can save lives. For LGBTQ youth and youth experiencing homelessness, one of the most compassionate gifts you can offer is a safe space where they can let their guard down and know they will be welcomed and accepted exactly as they are. Creating this space acts as a protective factor, increasing youths' self-esteem and buffering them from risk factors associated with experiencing homelessness, bullying, family rejection, etc.

#### **How to do this:**

For a monthly or weekly meal, partner with other churches to offer "Friday Night for Youth." This could be held in your church or at a local park or community center. Show a movie, do a craft, play shuffleboard, watch Ru Paul, have an open mic night - you get the idea! In our experience, members of a faith community are eager to volunteer to provide meals for youth groups, and this can be another great

way to plug in members of the community who want to be involved in serving youth. Publicize your “Night for Youth” with flyers both in your faith community and in other youth-serving organizations, as well as community message boards, and publicize online and through social media. Include in your message that *all* youth are welcome, perhaps including a rainbow flag or other symbol that an LGBTQ youth would recognize as indicative of a safe and welcoming space for them.

Another possibility is to have a series of special (not unfortunate) events monthly or quarterly. You can do:

### **Service Projects**

Youth feel connected when they are engaged in serving others. Youth who contribute to their community recognize that they are an important part of the community. Ideas for service projects include: a monthly sing along at a local nursing home, making and delivering cookies to a veterans home or homeless shelter, doing a beach or park clean up, or whatever is needed in your community.

### **Movie Nights**

Sing alongs can be fun, the Sound of Music is always a favorite. Or you could screen a documentary and have a panel or discussion, or the latest Disney movie, just out on DVD. Just ask youth what they want to watch, let them say something silly (no, we are NOT watching Carrie, what’s another idea?), and then you will get some good suggestions.

### **Concerts/Art Shows**

LGBTQ youth are often pretty artistic and musical. Imagine how much fun it would be for youth to turn your church's gymnasium into an open mic, concert venue, or art exhibition space!

### **Board Game Nights**

Never underestimate the power of chess or Clue to bring kids out. Bonus - provide snacks!

### **Tournament Nights**

Talk to the youth in your group and community about their favorite sports and games, then plan a tournament! Games like croquet, badminton, volleyball, and kickball are generally enjoyed by all youth, regardless of whether they see themselves as "athletes." For youth who enjoy sports, it can be memorable to have ballers from local college teams (that are "friendly") play some one on one or shoot around. This interaction helps LGBTQ youth to see possibilities for their own lives, maybe not the NBA or WNBA, but definitely college.

### **Dances**

It can be incredibly meaningful to be able to invite someone to dance when that is usually forbidden. In many areas, bringing a same gender date or dressing to match your own gender (not your birth certificate's gender) is life changing and affirming.

There are many advantages to holding events for youth, but events can be a lot of work. In some instances, you'll need to be very careful with venue, security, and insurance coverage (we'll go over this in Chapter 9 - Nuts & Bolts). For now, just be aware that there may be special requirements for you to navigate.

A couple of other things to consider when planning such events relate to youth involvement. First, if youth help with selecting and planning the event, more youth will show up. Simple as that. Second, some youth love excitement, others do not. Some youth are athletic, others are not. Some are artists, musicians, actors, researchers, botanists, and engineers. Providing a mixture of activities and events will appeal to a wide variety of youth, all of whom need support and community. We've even had great experiences empowering youth to share their passion with our group. Some youth in our drop-in centers were not comfortable with, say, singing or participating in competitive sports, but would really shine when we invited them to educate us about the orchids they grew, about their experience as a volunteer at the local animal shelter, about their collection of fossils and knowledge of dinosaurs, about the pies they handcraft. The possibilities are endless. Learning from each other is one of the most beautiful aspects of bringing together a diverse group of youth and volunteers in an accepting and affirming space.

Because it can be a lot of work to host your own events, it may be more realistic for your faith community, for the time being, to piggy-back on other youth

activities of LGBTQ community activities happening in your area. Perhaps you can piggy-back or partner with another organization to provide activities for the youth you are hoping to reach. For example, does your local library do book clubs? Would they consider adding a rainbow book club for teens? Could you volunteer or provide after group snacks? A few other ideas for piggybacking/collaboration:

### **Pride Events**

If your community has a pride festival or event, find a way to get involved. Recruit members of your faith community of all ages to participate. Could your church or group provide water to marchers, have a booth, volunteer and wear special tee shirts? For areas without such events (hang on!), could your church or faith space sponsor one? Just think about that.

### **GSA/QSA Activities**

If your local school has a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or Queer Straight Alliance (QSA), could your church “sponsor” it, maybe providing \$100 each year for their use? Could you volunteer to go in and speak, to purchase movie tickets for the group’s use, or bring snacks occasionally? You would be surprised what these acts of kindness would mean to the students and their advisor. GSA/QSA groups are always underfunded and often struggle to survive. They are always looking for partnerships and activities. Some school administrations are very rejecting, and in areas where the school won’t allow a

GSA/QSA you could offer a community-based GSA/QSA group (and we can help with that, too!). We know of an awesome librarian/ally who even started a GSA group in the library after the local school refused to allow one for their students.

### **LGBTQ Centers Nearby**

If there is an LGBTQ center near you, drop by and ask them what their needs are. It would be cool if your church or faith community could be helpful and supportive, and perhaps act as a venue for their center to have special events. You could also partner with the center on service projects, caroling, or services for weddings, funerals and special occasions. Many LGBTQ centers have ZERO relationships with faith communities - you could be the first they have “met”!

### **Highly Recommended Groundwork**

As you begin to reach out to other groups and organizations, before you undertake the projects described above or engage LGBTQ youth, there are three pieces of groundwork we recommend you consider: 1) Assess how affirming your church/congregation is of LGBTQ people (especially youth), then strategize around making your faith community more welcoming; 2) Compile lists of LGBTQ affirming service providers and resources for basic needs in your community; and 3) Educate

yourself and members of your faith community on the issues facing LGBTQ youth. Each of these aspects of preparation is discussed in more detail below.

1. **Assess how affirming your church/congregation is of LGBTQ people (especially youth), then strategize around making your faith community more welcoming**

*Are some youth discouraged from being in your building? How do you find out? And then what?* These are difficult questions, and will require you to don your “researcher” cap, at least temporarily. What would a researcher do? in short, they would collect data.

What is this “data” though? First, begin to notice the message being conveyed by the physical environment of your church or meeting space for your faith community. Do the families depicted in art and print materials include LGBTQ families? Do you display visual cues that would quickly convey to an LGBTQ person that they are welcome (rainbow flags, “safe zone” and “ally” signs and messages, etc.)?

Do you have at least one gender neutral restroom? This is a *big deal* but doesn’t need to be difficult - a single stall bathroom can have a gender neutral sign on it, like “toilet” or “rest room.”

Next, examine how language is used in your faith community when it comes to gender and LGBTQ identities. When making verbal introductions, or on intake forms or name tags, do you include your pronouns and invite others to share their pronouns as well as their name? When talking or inquiring about relationships, do you use gender neutral terms like “spouse” or “partner” rather than “girlfriend” or “husband”? Do you say “child” rather than “son” or “daughter”?

Is your language affirming during your worship services and events? Do you say All Are Welcome? Saying “all” doesn’t really mean everyone is welcome, sometimes. If you want to communicate welcome, say who you welcome - there are some beautiful signs that can be an inspiration. Having a faith community statement of welcome that you can share is wonderful - here is just one example:

### *Elk River Lutheran Affirmation Statement*

Here at Elk River Lutheran Church—ELCA—we are committed to being a loving and welcoming community of faith, centered in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, in faithfulness to the Gospel and consistent with our Mission Statement, to the best of our ability, we promise to provide worship opportunities, programs, ministries, leadership opportunities and pastoral care to all who seek God in this place. We all belong to the Priesthood of All Believers.

As a community striving to serve God and neighbor and to be open to all people, we at Elk River Lutheran Church welcome all to join us as we struggle to better understand the mysteries of God’s teachings. We are challenged by Christ to care for, to love, to understand and to listen to each other, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin or economic status. We celebrate together our unity as God’s people. ERLC is a place where all are welcomed to participate fully in the life of this congregation and each person is invited to share his or her own unique gifts.

To this end Elk River Lutheran Church is officially now a Reconciling in Christ congregation and affirms our position of Welcome and Ministry with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.



Finally, you can assess the cultural competency of faith leaders and members of your faith community in key roles. If possible, contact a local LGBTQ organization and ask them to facilitate a cultural competency training at your church or faith community. For faith leaders who provide individual, couple, and family counseling, cultural competency and knowledge of dynamics and challenges unique to LGBTQ people and families is crucial. Take time to educate yourself on best practices. Read. Attend trainings that are available to expand your knowledge. Listen to the LGBTQ people around you. Being an ally is all about continuous learning.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources' Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0<sup>24</sup> (download at <http://www.welcomingresources.org/welcomingtoolkit.pdf>) contains a 'Congregational Assessment' tool, a 25 item questionnaire to be completed by multiple individuals in a faith community or congregation and used as the basis for conversation and planning to be more inclusive and affirming. This questionnaire assesses several domains, including the congregation's mission statement, LGBTQ membership, engagement in social justice issues, and inclusivity in language and examples used in sermons. Having an honest conversation about what your congregation is doing well, and what areas could be improved upon is the start of something huge, but is just that, the *start*. What will you *do* to make your church or faith

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<sup>24</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources (2013). *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0*. Retrieved from: <http://www.welcomingresources.org/welcomingtoolkit.pdf>

community more welcoming to *all* people, including LGBTQ youth and youth experiencing homelessness?

2. **Compile lists of LGBTQ affirming service providers and resources for basic needs in your community**

Just as members of the LGBTQ community often struggle to find a faith community where they feel welcomed and affirmed, many have had negative experiences with medical professionals and mental health professionals. As an ally, you have the ability to act as a buffer, shielding an LGBTQ person from these negative, sometimes traumatic exchanges. One way to do this is to create an LGBTQ affirming provider list and make it available to members of your faith community.

In some communities, there will be an existing list of doctors, therapists and other professionals who work with members of the LGBTQ community. If this is the case in your community, your task is simply to make this list available online and in print, then ensure that it stays up-to-date. If no such list exists in your community, this can be a great service opportunity for those in your congregation who are eager to take action as an ally. So, how do you determine who to include on your Affirming Provider list? First, you can ask LGBTQ community members whether they have an affirming providers they would recommend to others. But here's where your volunteers come in; with a little training, members of your faith community can be

responsible for calling service providers to determine to what extent they are welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ people. How? Through a pre-determined set of questions designed to provide a snapshot of the organization through the eyes of an LGBTQ person. Important questions to ask include:

- Do you have a formal non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity?
- Do you ask for preferred name and pronouns used at intake?
- Are transgender and intersex people served on the basis of their gender identity or their sex assigned at birth?
- Do you have one or more gender neutral/all genders bathroom?
- Have you/your staff been trained in LGBTQ cultural competency?
- Do you/your staff provide LGBTQ culturally appropriate referrals and resources when requested?

For more ideas see: Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider - LGBTQIA Healthcare Guild at [http://healthcareguild.com/questions\\_to\\_ask\\_providers.html](http://healthcareguild.com/questions_to_ask_providers.html)

One last note - whenever possible, try to identify and include affirming providers on your list who use a sliding scale or work with people who lack insurance and financial resources.

This leads to the importance of being able to refer people (including LGBTQ youth and youth experiencing homelessness) who currently lack the ability to meet their basic needs to local resources that can help them to ensure they have adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and mental health care.



## Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's Hierarchy provides a compelling visual for a concept that folks who have experienced homelessness or advocated for people experiencing homeless understand intuitively - when basic human needs are going unmet, it's extraordinarily difficult (at times impossible) to set goals and take action to improve yourself, your circumstances, and your future.

Helping a person, no matter their age, to know where their next meal will come from, or to be assured that they will have a safe place to sleep that night, allows them to explore and set goals for themselves, moving toward happiness, self-sufficiency, and contribution.

Creating a resource list of local basic needs services and making it available to members of your faith community is simple, a similar process to compiling a list of LGBTQ affirming providers in your area. Some communities will have existing lists of local shelters, food banks, and free or reduced cost medical and mental health care providers. If this resource list exists in your community, make sure it is accessible to anyone visiting your faith community or church. If this list doesn't exist for your community, this is another service opportunity for volunteers in your congregation. With some online searching and a few information-gathering calls, a list of needed resources and how to access them can be created and maintained.

Services available vary significantly from city to city, but an example of a simple folded pocket card listing basic needs resources can be found at <http://www.homelesshouston.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/HELP-CARD-lud-05302014.pdf> or search for "Pocket Pal", a common nickname for a resource card.

Below are some ideas of organization and service categories you may want to consider including in a local basic needs resource list.

- Local and national crisis lines
- LGBTQ affirming emergency overnight shelters and domestic violence shelters
- Food banks and pantries
- Healthcare and medical resources that are free or sliding-scale including organizations like Planned Parenthood
- McKinney Vento Liaison's for local school districts (this person is responsible for providing education-promoting services to students experiencing homelessness)
- Local services and resources for people with disabilities
- Local services and resources for Veterans
- Free or sliding-scale mental health care
- Free or sliding-scale substance use disorder counseling services
- Free or sliding-scale dental services
- Resources for families, parents, and children
- LGBTQ affirming youth serving organizations
- Services offered at the local health department
- Soup kitchens (where to find hot meals)
- Places to receive clothing or clothing vouchers
- Organizations providing education and employment assistance

If you happen to have some enthusiastic volunteers, you could even create separate lists for LGBTQ affirming basic needs services, or separate lists of resources for people over 18 vs. under 18, for families vs. individuals, etc.

### **3. Educate yourself and members of your faith community on issues facing LGBTQ youth**

In drop-in centers serving homeless youth, it's not *uncommon* to see a dog enjoying a plate of spaghetti, or a tiny kitten being carried gently, deliberately in a winter hat. These are unexpected surprises to many, but not to those who have worked with youth experiencing homelessness and know that animals are important, sacred, to these youth. Seeing youth put the needs of the animals they adore before their own can be tender, revealing a side of the youth not always apparent under their (adaptive, necessary) "hard shell." Understanding the importance of animals, and responding to youth appropriately as they offer their own lunch to their dog or scramble around the kitchen looking for something to feed their recently rescued kitten, can make or break a trusting relationship. This is just one small component of street culture.

#### **Youth Homelessness and Street Culture**

Because youth experiencing homelessness live day-to-day with no guarantee that their basic needs are met, a culture, "street culture" evolves. Working effectively with homeless youth, especially those who have been on the street for months, sometimes years, is truly cross-cultural work. It is critical to understand that their culture, though it may not always make sense to you, is what allows them to survive on the street, where food and shelter are tenuous, and safety from physical and sexual assault is never guaranteed. Understanding street culture, street dynamics, and street families will benefit you, your faith community, and the homeless youth

you serve. If your community has a youth shelter, see if someone from the shelter would be willing to train yourself and key members of your faith community in effectively communicating with and supporting youth experiencing homelessness. If this is not an option in your area, *Street Culture 2.0: An Epistemology of Street-Dependent Youth* by J.T. Fest (2014) is an excellent book on the topic. Another great resource is National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth, a booklet available for download online.<sup>25</sup> For a different perspective on the relationships between access to resources, culture, and behavior, the book, *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* is an informative read.<sup>26</sup>

### **Suicide**

As discussed throughout this book, LGBTQ youth attempt suicide at rates higher than those of their non-LGBTQ peers. Training and ongoing education in suicide prevention basics can equip you, leaders in your faith community, and those who work with youth specifically, with the knowledge and skills needed to recognize when a person is in suicidal crisis and how to empathetically, effectively respond. Knowing what questions to ask, what actions to take, and where to turn to get help

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<sup>25</sup> Lambda Legal, National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Network for Youth, & National Center for Lesbian Rights (2009). *National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth*. Retrieved from: [https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl\\_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth\\_0.pdf](https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/bkl_national-recommended-best-practices-for-lgbt-homeless-youth_0.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Payne, R.K., DeVol, P.E., & Smith, T.D. (2006). *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.



for a youth or adult who is thinking of suicide can empower members to take a proactive approach to preventing suicide. It is likely that your local health department or another local organization provides some form of suicide prevention training. One common training of this kind offered by many health departments is QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), a model providing guidance in recognizing the signs of suicidal crisis and simple steps anyone can take to prevent suicide. Ask mental health professionals in your community about what trainings you may be able to bring to your faith community. Know the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number (800-273-8255) and other local crisis numbers, and post them around where members of your faith community will see. To learn more about preventing suicide among LGBTQ youth, our free publication *Faith-Based Approaches to LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention*<sup>27</sup> can be accessed here: <http://parity.nyc/suicideprevention/>

### **Sexual Victimization and Exploitation**

When it comes to preventing sexual abuse and exploitation among LGBTQ youth, awareness and communication are key. Talk with members of your faith community, local service providers, and educators about what is known about youth homelessness and victimization in your community. These are likely issues that are hidden to many. Awareness and understanding, along with open lines of communication with adults, make it less likely that youth will be victimized or

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<sup>27</sup> Edmonds Allen, M. (2018). *Faith Forward: Faith Based Approached to LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention*. NYC: Parity. Retrieved from: <http://parity.nyc/s/FaithForwardSuicidePreventionPrePub.pdf>

exploited. Providing safe, positive spaces and connection to trustworthy adults with healthy boundaries can act as a shield for LGBTQ youth. Local law enforcement and domestic and sexual violence prevention/intervention organizations are also valuable partners in preventing sexual victimization among LGBTQ youth.

### **Using Trauma-Informed, Youth Empowerment Based Approaches**

Because LGBTQ youth are at high risk for homelessness, suicide, and victimization, having an understanding of trauma and using a trauma-informed approach to serve LGBTQ youth is critical in providing effective services. Understanding trauma and its effects helps us to normalize and make sense of youths' actions and responses, respond in more effective and empathetic ways, and understand our own responses and their impact on youth. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, is an excellent book on the topic.<sup>28</sup>

Trauma informed approaches are strengths-focused and empowerment based. Operating from a youth empowerment framework means that youth are involved in all aspects of the planning and implementation of programs and services, and that their voices are heard and respected at all stages.

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<sup>28</sup> Van der Kolk, B.A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking.

Educating yourself and members of your faith community on the effects of trauma and the basic principles of youth empowerment will have a profound positive impact on the youth you serve.

## **Coming next in the Faith*Forward* Series: Faith-based Approaches to Preventing and Addressing Youth Homelessness Parts 2 & 3**

### **Part Two: Creating a LGBTQ Youth Ministry**

Starting a weekly outreach or drop in center for LGBTQ youth including logistics, board, mission, assessing need, assessing capacity, managing donations, engaging youth experiencing homelessness, training volunteers, marketing, securing funding, and *much* more.

### **Part Three: LGBTQ Youth Curricula and Programming**

How to work with youth to develop programming that is evidence-based and outcome driven. Our award-winning Next Step Project, healthy relationships curriculum, positive youth identity development group, resilience group, LGBTQ cultural competency training and train-the-trainer curricula, our volunteer training manual, and more.

*Please note: this is a pre-publication copy, released for use while the manuscript is being prepared for publication. If you have recommendations, suggestions, resources or any other feedback, please send them to [info@parity.nyc](mailto:info@parity.nyc)*