

A prepublication excerpt from:

Faith-based Approaches to Addressing and Preventing LGBTQ Youth Homelessness

From the Parity **FaithForward** series

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. We also suggest having Family Acceptance Project booklets on hand to share with parents and youth: 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 maybe the latest Disney movie, just out on DVD. Just ask youth what they want to watch, let them say something silly (we are NOT watching Carrie), 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 incredibly 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

A good start would be having a diversity or ally training - your local college or LGBTQ center might offer those, or we can do an in-person training or webinar.

Are some youth discouraged from being in your building?

Are there gender neutral restrooms? And this doesn't need to be hard - a single stall bathroom can have a gender neutral sign on it, like “toilet” or “rest room.”

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:

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

LGBTQ affirming doctors, therapists, domestic violence shelters, resources for basic needs, including where to access food, clothing, shelter, and health care. Start with a few and then add to your list over time. You will hear recommendations, and you will be asked for help! Each will give you new names and organizations to share.

Here is a start of some general categories for your list:

Housing, including:
 emergency shelter/DV shelter, YMCA, local housing authority
Food (food pantries, food banks, churches offering hot meals, etc.)
Clothing
Mental health
Health promotion
Social connections
Faith organizations of different denominations
Help with employment, etc.

Categories to include:
 Youth under 18
 Over 18
 Youth with children
 Transgender and genderqueer youth

Where to look:
 Your local 211 or similar
 Shelters
 Youth serving organizations
 Domestic Violence Shelters
 Police station

More specific lists:

Create an affirming providers list:

- Doctors and medical professionals (particularly trans affirming)
- Therapists, including couples and family therapists
- Lawyers and legal assistance (including those who offer free or sliding scale services)
- Wedding officiants, wedding planners and vendors

List local LGBTQ resources:

- Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) or Queer Straight Alliances (QSAs) in local schools - both K-12 and colleges/universities
- PFLAG Chapter
- SAGE chapter?
- LGBTQ centers
- LGBTQ support groups
- Crisis lines - suicide, domestic violence, etc.
- Local McKinney Vento Liaisons for nearby districts
- Services for people with disabilities
- Addiction services
- Local health departments and services they offer

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.)
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- 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>

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

Learning about the street culture of youth experiencing homelessness is heart breaking - AND is filled with hope! Youth experiencing homelessness are some of the most caring, intelligent and resourceful people you will ever meet. Here are just some things to know - and ask us if you would like us to arrange for a webinar or in person workshop on homeless youth culture.

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.

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 many don't know where their next meal will come from, 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, or ask us!

Fest, J.T. (2014). *Street Culture 2.0: An Epistemology of Street-Dependent Youth*.

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

Bonus topic:

What Can I Do To Help Stop the Sexual Exploitation Of Homeless Youth In My Community?

- Be the home in your neighborhood that welcomes youth. Youth should know adults in their community that are kind, caring, and take an interest in them! Be the adult role model that reaches out to youth, spends time with them, and knows about community resources to help youth find help.
- Talk with your neighbors, your faith community, and your local school about what is known about youth homelessness in your community. It may be a hidden problem that needs to be discussed.
- Be an advocate for increased federal and local resources for community outreach and relationship building for older adolescents. Are there local programs in your area or city that reach out to youth in a professional and coordinated manner? How do youth know where to turn for help?
- Be a vocal advocate for increased housing resources. Youth are less likely to be exploited when they are off the streets and in stable housing. There are model youth housing programs that can be developed in rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods. Is there enough affordable housing in your neighborhood for older teenagers and young adults who are fleeing abuse and neglect?
- Ask for expanded support (mental health counseling, life skills training, and access to employment programs) for teen girls and mothers. Commercial sexual exploitation is

often focused on vulnerable teen girls.

- Ask if there are mental health treatment programs in your area that youth can easily access.
- Make sure that local law enforcement is targeting the businesses (pimps, strip clubs, escort services) and customers (johns) of the commercial sexual industry and not the victims (youth and young adults) for prosecution. Work to build partnerships between nonprofit programs and law enforcement to offer diversion to community-based services and housing to victims when they are picked up by police officers.

From the (National Alliance to End Homelessness) Homeless Youth and Sexual Exploitation Report (https://b3cdn.net/naeh/c0103117f1ee8f2d84_e8m6ii5q2.pdf)