

# Caseworkers with LGBTQ Clients

If you work with young people in foster care, you probably have clients who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual orientation (“LGBTQ”). These young people are at high risk of harassment, abuse and self-destructive behaviors, and too often suffer from misunderstanding and mistreatment by the child welfare systems that should protect them. LGBTQ young people, like all of your clients, deserve to be treated with respect and sensitivity. There is much you can do to help your LGBTQ clients make healthy transitions from foster care to adulthood.

## **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE ARE IN YOUR MIDST.**

Don’t assume that all of your clients are heterosexual. Even if you think you do not have clients who are LGBTQ, you most likely do. Many LGBTQ young people fear the negative reactions that come from revealing who they are and carefully hide that they are LGBTQ.

## **EXAMINE YOUR OWN BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES THAT MIGHT AFFECT YOUR PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS.**

Be aware of your own beliefs, prejudices and gaps in knowledge surrounding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Regardless of your personal beliefs, remember that above all you owe a professional duty of care to your LGBTQ clients. For example, licensed and certified members of the National Association of Social Workers are bound by a code of ethics that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and requires a client’s express consent before the release of confidential information.

## **TREAT YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS WITH THE SAME DIGNITY AND EXPECTATIONS AS YOU DO ALL OTHERS.**

Don’t assume that all the problems your LGBTQ clients have are related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Don’t address sexual orientation or gender identity questions or concerns as deviant or pathological. By the same token, don’t allow an LGBTQ young person to be subjected to so-called conversion or reparative therapy for the purpose of changing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Such “therapies” have been shunned by the leading national professional counseling organizations as unethical and potentially dangerous. Establish ground rules for behavior by LGBTQ clients, including standards for acceptable sexual behavior, that are the same as for heterosexual youth. Always respect and maintain an LGBTQ young person’s privacy and never disclose confidential information about sexual orientation or gender identity without the client’s permission.

## **FOSTERING TRANSITIONS**

A CWLA/Lambda Legal  
Joint Initiative



### **BE AWARE OF YOUR LANGUAGE.**

Eliminate anti-LGBTQ slurs from discussion. Use gender-neutral language with all of your clients. For example, rather than asking a teenage boy if he has a girlfriend, ask if he has “someone special” in his life. Learn the difference between “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” and use the words *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender* and *questioning* in appropriate contexts.

### **DON'T STEREOTYPE LGBTQ PEOPLE.**

Don't assume that you can identify LGBTQ people based on stereotypical mannerisms or characteristics. Also avoid the assumption that all LGBTQ people “are the same” or necessarily share a common sense of community. Although LGBTQ people are in every corner of the country, the cultural responses to sexual orientation and gender identity may vary a great deal even within a particular community. The diversity of society in general is reflected within LGBTQ communities.

admit it, but commit to learn what you need to know to provide competent supportive services.

### **SEEK OUT SAFE, AFFIRMING PLACEMENTS FOR LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE.**

People who are perceived as LGBTQ are at a significantly higher risk of harassment and violence. Don't put your LGBTQ clients into placements, services, schools or neighborhoods where they will be unsafe or misunderstood. If seeking a foster or adoptive home placement, be sure that the home is accepting of LGBTQ people. Do outreach to LGBT and LGBT-friendly adults who can provide safe and nurturing homes for LGBTQ youth. If placing an LGBTQ young person in a group home setting, make sure that explicit nondiscrimination policies are in place and enforced. If such group homes do not exist in your community, inquire of a prospective home whether an LGBTQ person has ever been placed

“It became real clear to me that my caseworker wouldn't be able to handle it if I came out and told her I was gay. A couple of times I tried to hint around about it, but she just wasn't hearing any of it. And she was always asking me about my 'girlfriends.' So when she found me a foster home, I knew I couldn't count on her to have made sure they'd be cool with my being gay. I was afraid to tell my foster family, too. So, more time in the closet for me.”

– Youth in Care

### **CREATE A POSITIVE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR OFFICE THAT WELCOMES AND AFFIRMS LGBTQ PEOPLE.**

Display recognizable symbols of support such as pink triangles and rainbow flags to let all your clients know that you are a sensitive, safe and welcoming person for LGBTQ people to go to. You can post Lambda Legal's Youth in Foster Care poster, included in this tool kit and available from the Lambda Legal website, as a sign that your LGBTQ clients are safe to be open with you.

### **KNOW WHAT TO DO IF A CLIENT DISCLOSES TO YOU THAT HE OR SHE IS LGBTQ.**

Use the disclosure as an opportunity to show unconditional support for your client. Be willing to have an in-depth discussion, and allow your client to process her or his feelings. The goal in working effectively with LGBTQ young people is to create a safe, supportive and nurturing environment within which they can find the resources they need. Assist LGBTQ young people in deciding to whom, where, when and how to come out in order to ensure safety while maintaining privacy. If you lack knowledge on LGBTQ issues don't be afraid to

there and what the experience was like. Also inquire if the training provided to staff includes information about working with LGBTQ youth. Trust the instincts and observations of your LGBTQ clients when it comes to feeling safe and welcome. Respond promptly to anti-LGBTQ slurs and attacks. Be prepared to advocate for fair and equal treatment of your LGBTQ clients.

### **BE PREPARED TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH TRANSGENDER YOUTH.**

Transgender youth may have unique medical and housing needs. They also often face serious risk of harassment and violence. It's important that you seek out additional resources if necessary to provide appropriate services and placements. Allow all of your clients to express their gender identities in ways that are most comfortable for them, including allowing transgender clients to dress in the manner they choose. Support transgender young people's gender identity and expression by referring to them by the names and pronouns they prefer.

## **BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.**

Many LGBTQ young people benefit from attending a community-based peer support group. Those that require professional therapeutic intervention need access to supportive professional services. Your agency should develop and distribute an up-to-date list of LGBTQ community resources. If you don't know where to find such resources, contact us, your nearest LGBTQ community center ([www.lgbtcenters.org](http://www.lgbtcenters.org)), or local chapter of Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)), or look online for national and community resources.

## **PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES TO OTHERS IN THE LGBTQ YOUNG PERSON'S LIFE.**

Be prepared to provide members of the birth, foster or adoptive families of LGBTQ clients with relevant resource materials on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as with opportunities to discuss and process issues of concern.

advocate for changes at your agency to make the environment more LGBTQ-inclusive.

## ***The many other components of Getting Down to Basics offer additional support.***

This tool kit includes additional handouts covering a variety of topics addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth and adults involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, such as *Basic Facts About Being LGBTQ*, *Teaching LGBTQ Competence in Schools of Social Work*, *Working with Transgender Youth*, *Families Supporting an LGBTQ Child*, *Information for LGBTQ Youth in Care* and *LGBTQ Youth Resources*. To order free copies of the *Getting Down to Basics* tool kit, contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTeen (toll free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org) or [www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org).

“My old caseworker changed the subject the one time I tried to let on I was a lesbian. After that he treated me differently, too — like there was a cold wind blowing in the room. Then I got transferred to my new caseworker. The minute I walked in her office I knew things were going to be better. She had this poster about gay people over her desk and some rainbow beads hanging on her lamp. It was okay to tell her who I am.”

— *Youth in Care*

## **ENSURE THAT YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS RECEIVE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES.**

Provide developmentally appropriate information and resources to all your clients about sexuality and sexual health, including about LGBT issues and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. If not already in place, encourage your agency to adopt written policies providing clients access to free and confidential HIV testing without guardian consent or notification. Protect the privacy of your clients' HIV status, with disclosure only on a need-to-know basis.

## **ADVOCATE FOR SUPPORTIVE, COMPETENT CARE FOR LGBTQ YOUTH AT YOUR AGENCY.**

Take an inventory of the policies and training at your agency. Are LGBTQ people included in nondiscrimination policies? Are LGBTQ clients included in your best practice guidelines and standards? Are LGBTQ issues included in preservice and in-service training curricula? Be prepared to



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