

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

NOW IS THE TIME

LGBTQ* people live in every county across the U.S. Simply put: if you work in child welfare, you can safely assume that you have LGBTQ youth and parents coming through your doors to access services. In fact, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in foster care and LGBTQ adults are most likely to be raising children in states with the least amount of legal protections — not only in places like New York City.

Despite recent progress toward legal and social equality for LGBTQ Americans, societal stigma remains strong and LGBTQ youth and parents continue to be vulnerable to discrimination. Compared to their peers, LGBTQ youth have a higher average number of placements; are more likely to report harassment, discrimination, and violence; experience higher rates of health and mental health challenges and lower self-esteem; and are less likely to achieve permanency.¹ Additionally, LGBTQ parents continue to experience barriers when engaging with child welfare systems. For example, in a recent HRC survey, child welfare professionals acknowledged

that bias against LGBTQ foster and adoptive parents still exists.² Nineteen percent of participants felt that straight/heterosexual foster or adoptive parents are preferable to LGBQ parents. Similarly, nearly a quarter of respondents expressed a preference for cisgender (non-transgender) parents.

Now — as some lawmakers work to legalize discrimination against LGBTQ youth and parents — it is perhaps more important than ever for child welfare systems to take action to ensure LGBTQ youth and parents receive the services they deserve free from discrimination. This is not only the right thing to do. It is necessary work in order to ensure compliance with federal standards around LGBTQ non-discrimination and the best practice recommendations of leading professional associations.

Every single child welfare professional — from frontline workers to administrators and executives — has a role to play and this Beginner's Guide to LGBTQ Inclusion is designed to give you ideas of where to start.

TERMS TO KNOW:

***LGBTQ:** Acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning.”

Lesbian: Describes women who are attracted to other women.

Gay: Describes people who are attracted to members of their same gender.

Bisexual: Describes people who are attracted to more than one gender.

Transgender: Describes a person whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth.

Queer: Describes fluid identities and orientations, sometimes used interchangeably with “LGBT.”

Questioning: Describes people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

SOGIE: Acronym for “sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.” Everyone has SOGIE, not only LGBTQ people.

Sexual Orientation: A person’s emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to other people.

Gender Identity: A person’s internal sense of being male, female, or, for some people, a blend of both or neither.

Gender Expression: The ways people show their gender to others through clothing, haircut, roles and activities, etc.

WHAT DOES LGBTQ INCLUSION MEAN FOR YOU?

FRONT-LINE WORKERS

You'll need to be sure that you understand how your agency is implementing LGBTQ-inclusive policies and practices and that you're incorporating these into your work accordingly.

- » **Build your own knowledge about LGBTQ people and their experiences.** Even the most affirming and educated people have room to continually challenge themselves and grow with respect to cultural competency. A great place to start is hrc.org/acaf-resources.
- » **Take time to understand your feelings towards LGBTQ people.** Explore the range of thoughts, emotions, and questions you have and be mindful of any potential biases that may impact your role as a professional.
- » **Assess—and discuss with your supervisor—how LGBTQ-inclusion connects with your individual roles and responsibilities.** (e.g., supporting reunification, recruitment and preparation of resource parents, etc.)
- » **Contribute to an inclusive organizational culture free of discrimination.** Enforce a zero tolerance policy for homo/bi/transphobic comments or jokes and remind others that these comments can be incredibly harmful.
- » **Consider ways subtle discrimination based on the actual or perceived SOGIE of the youth and parents you work with may be present** (e.g. assuming that none of your resource parents would be willing to welcome and LGBTQ teen into their home, and therefore not asking). Talk with your supervisor about specific situations that arise so you can strengthen your ability to recognize and help prevent discrimination.
- » **Seek out information from your supervisor and others** about how your agency will assess its current level of LGBTQ inclusion.

SUPERVISORS

Your staff members will be looking to you for information on how your agency is implementing LGBTQ-inclusive policies and practices and for coaching on how they connect to their roles and to their existing professional skills and ethics.

- » **Set clear expectations for your staff and provide consistent messaging about best practice in LGBTQ inclusion.** Help your staff

understand any new approaches they should take in their work to ensure LGBTQ youth and parents receive services free of discrimination.

- » **Create opportunities—in individual supervision, team meetings, and other settings—for your staff** to discuss questions or concerns about LGBTQ inclusion so they can build their individual capacity and learn from each other.
- » **Help your staff understand how LGBTQ inclusion fits into your agency's existing policy and practices,** as well as into fundamentals of good social work practice.
- » **Create a safe space for LGBTQ parents, youth, and colleagues at your workplace** by advocating for affirming policies and practices.

LEADERS AND MANAGERS

You have a key role in making it clear to your staff and partner organizations that LGBTQ inclusion is an agency priority. Your actions to incorporate best practices into your agency's infrastructure are crucial for ensuring that staff in all roles and at all levels do the same.

- » **Provide clear guidance and messaging to your staff and to your agency's partners** about your agency's commitment to non-discrimination and inclusion. Spend time preparing to respond to questions or concerns that may be directed your way.
- » **Examine the system-wide implications** for improving LGBTQ inclusion. Look at your key organizational drivers and infrastructure—existing policies, practice guidance, staff training, and supervision—to identify needed changes.
- » **Review and update your staff orientation and training materials** to ensure that they include your agency's commitment to LGBTQ inclusive practice, non-discrimination policies, and opportunities to build staff members' knowledge and competency for working with LGBTQ youth and parents.
- » **Invest in necessary staff training** to build your agency's LGBTQ competency. See *Keys to Building Staff LGBTQ Competency* for more information.

- » **Consider how your agency develops and oversees contracts and grants** — for both existing and future opportunities—to ensure contractors and grantees are in compliance with your commitment to LGBTQ inclusion.
- » **Create and support internal working groups** to make any needed revisions to forms, practice guides, and other materials.

HOW DOES LGBTQ INCLUSION APPLY TO VARIOUS AREAS OF CHILD WELFARE WORK?

LGBTQ inclusion has implications for a wide range of child welfare responsibilities some of which are outlined here. Your agency should explore each in more detail with an emphasis on best practice rather than minimum compliance.

Child protection investigations — As your agency responds to reports of child abuse or neglect, it is important to consider whether a youth or parent's LGBTQ status is a relevant factor in the family dynamics. This might involve challenges in the parent-child relationship based on the child's LGBTQ identity. Agency staff should also ensure that work with parents is free of any bias or discrimination based on the parents' actual or perceived LGBTQ status.

Family preservation and reunification — When working on family preservation and reunification, it is crucial to understand each family member's characteristics, strengths, and needs—which includes SOGIE—to tailor your interventions. Research shows that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented among homeless youth and the most common reason for their homelessness is either being forced out of their home or running away because of family rejection around SOGIE.³ Staff need the skills and resources necessary to help parents address any rejecting behaviors related to SOGIE that may be contributing to an unsafe or hostile environment for children in the family. For example, evidence-based resources from Dr. Caitlyn Ryan and the Family Acceptance Project.⁴ At an agency level, the policies and practices of contracted community agencies and service providers should be examined to ensure that they are LGBTQ-inclusive and competent.

Recruitment, preparation, and support of resource parents — Child welfare agencies—both public agencies and their contractors—should implement the policies and practices necessary to welcome and affirm LGBTQ prospective parents prior to rolling out any targeted LGBTQ family recruitment activities. This ensures that the process from initial inquiry through to licensure and placement does not involve any additional barriers for LGBTQ parents. For example, the home study process needs to assess all prospective parents appropriately and without bias, using inclusive language and effectively assessing the strengths of prospective parents. See *What It Means for Your Work with Parents* for more information.

Matching & placement decisions — Matching and placement decisions must be made free from bias based on the SOGIE of either the youth or the prospective parents. Building on existing best practice in this area, staff should consider SOGIE in the context of all of the characteristics, strengths, and needs of the youth and the family. Staff members should be prepared to facilitate conversations about potential matches with LGBTQ parents and equipped to assess whether a potential placement is going to be affirming for a young LGBTQ person in care.

Independent living services — Staff need to ensure that they provide affirming and appropriate support and independent living preparation to all youth, including meeting LGBTQ youths' unique needs related to healthy development and building relationships with supportive adults in their lives. Topics to address include developing an affirming support network, navigating higher education, identifying and obtaining LGBTQ-inclusive employment opportunities, and safe housing. See [HRC's guide for independent LGBTQ youth](#) for more information.

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LEARN MORE

This tip sheet shares a few examples of things you can do to build your—and your agency's—capacity to work effectively with LGBTQ youth and adults. Download the additional tip sheets in this series for more detailed information and ideas on next steps. Also check out the HRC Foundation's resources at www.hrc.org.

- 1 Annie E. Casey Foundation. LGBTQ in Child Welfare: A Systematic Review of the Literature. September 2016.
- 2 Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2016) . Serving LGBTQ Youth & Parents: Child Welfare Professionals' Perspectives. Online at: http://hrc-assets.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com//files/assets/resources/HRC_Child_Welfare_Perspectives_On_Serving_LGBTQ.pdf
- 3 Choi, S.K., Wilson, B.D.M., Shelton, J. & Gates, G. (2015). Serving Our Youth 2015: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Experiencing Homelessness. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund.
- 4 See Family Acceptance Project at:
<https://familyproject.sfsu.edu>

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