

## Spotlight on homeless LGBT youth

December 21, 2006

by Heather Cassell

Calling a spot on a street corner home isn't the image conjured when most people think of where they live, but for an estimated 672,000 queer youth across the country who find themselves homeless each year the streets or temporary shelter are often the closest thing to home they have.

**According to an exhaustive report released December 14 by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force – collaborating with the National Coalition for the Homeless – an estimated 42 percent of up to 1.6 million homeless youth are LGBT identified, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.**

"It's absolutely shameful that in a civilized society in this day and age that tens of thousands of kids are sleeping on the street," said New York City Council member Lew Fidler, chairman of the council's Youth Services Committee. "I don't think that people know that 20,000 kids sleep on the streets [of New York City] every night – if they did they would be appalled."

The primary reason why teens and young adults run away from their families or foster homes is due to conflicts within their homes. According to NGLTF's report, half of queer teens who come out experience some form of homophobia from their parents or guardians, 26 percent are kicked out of their homes, and one-third of youths report that they are assaulted when they come out.

Despite increased awareness of LGBT people and issues, homophobia remains to be a large societal problem, even in large urban areas such as New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area.

"They haven't had the same experience that many of us have had growing up, where we had a supportive family environment – whatever our families looked like – to be able to help us transition successfully into adulthood," said Sherilyn Adams, executive director of Larkin Street Youth Services in San Francisco. "They are young people with goals and dreams and what they lack is support and the tools to be able to accomplish this."

According to the National Runaway Switchboard, which provided the data for NGLTF's report, it is estimated that between 15,000 and 20,000 youths are living on New York City's streets annually. Experts working with these kids believe that 8,400 of them are LGBT. Detailed fact sheets for other states and cities are scheduled for release January 2.

The Big Apple is taking an aggressive stand. Fidler, along with City Council member Alan Gerson and out lesbian Council Speaker Christine Quinn, are working to improve the city's response to homeless youth. Within two years funds allocated to support services jumped from \$1.2 million to \$2.6 million, which they hope to make a permanent part of the city's annual budget.

A portion of the funding is specifically being directed toward agencies that support queer youth to get them off of the streets into housing as well as receive services that will assist them to lead fulfilling and healthy lives. The programs have been successful, but city officials agree that they are just getting started and that more needs to be done.

"I don't think that anybody in the city government is saying that we are doing well with this, but to identify and map the problem is always the first step, so that's huge," said Paul Nagle, director of communication for Gerson.

Nagel sees the report as a major tool to assist with acquiring funding and creating policy changes, such as with the federal Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Children Protection Act of 2003, which will be up for revision in 2008. He believes the value of the report is that it will have a positive impact on all homeless youth.

New York City isn't the only major metropolitan in the U.S. that is aware of the realities homeless youths' needs. In San Francisco, a survey of 93 queer and transgender youth earlier this year found that more services are needed. And while city officials have been able to secure funding for a small number of beds in transitional housing programs, nonprofit agencies continue to face tight budgets.

The Youth Empowerment Team at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center, which surveyed queer youth, also found that 89 percent of them don't feel safe in shelters despite the fact that 85 percent state housing is the number one priority for them.

Economic issues were second to housing, according to the YET survey.

The NGLTF report echoed the same concerns contained in the YET report. Despite leaving unsafe environments, queer youth continue to struggle to find a safe place where they can pursue their dreams and goals.

Homeless youths' struggles aren't lost on Mayor Gavin Newsom or other city officials. While youth were left out of Newsom's third annual state of the homelessness address on December 14 – the same day NGLTF released its report – he is waiting to receive specific information about homeless youth in San Francisco from the Transitional Youth Task Force he established in March.

"I agree with the mayor that the city is doing a far better job in addressing homelessness through supportive housing," said Supervisor Bevan Dufty, who secured \$750,027 this year for the Community Partnership for LGBTQ Youth for subsidized housing and supportive services and wants to make the funds permanent in the city's annual budget.

The community partnership successfully located and has retained long-term housing for LGBT youth at the Perramont Hotel in the Castro, which currently provides 10 units for queer youth. According to Dufty, the number of units is expected to increase to 20, but it's clear that current housing units compared to the youth waiting for a place to call their own is unbalanced. Dufty and advocates are seeking landlords who will negotiate affordable subsidized leases for other apartments. While for queer youth it's ideal to find housing in the Castro, Dufty is open to all housing opportunities throughout the city.

In the meantime, services that provide temporary or long-term shelter for homeless youth remain an option. Larkin Street Youth Services currently provides a variety of temporary shelter and long-term housing opportunities for youth and is a part of the community partnership. Guerrero House provides longer-term housing with its 18-month program that provides life-skills training and other opportunities for youth. The waiting lists are long, but that's only a sign of how necessary the services are, Adams noted.

Larkin Street declined to make some of its homeless queer youth clients available to the *Bay Area Reporter* to comment for this article.

Youth who are under 18 years of age or emancipated have another option in the Bay Area. Family Builders By Adoption recently launched "No Place Like Home," to provide foster homes specifically for queer youth throughout the nine Bay Area counties, and is seeking families willing to open their homes to queer youth. The program is similar to Los Angeles' Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services, which has been in operation for over a decade.

Members of YET are finding a way to fulfill their dreams and goals. They are conceptualizing a set of best practices as well as publishing *YET Zine Zone*, a zine to educate homeless and runaway youth to empower themselves to be self-sufficient. It should be available at the center this week.

**To find out more information about the report visit NGLTF at [www.thetaskforce.org/media/release.cfm?releaseID=1019](http://www.thetaskforce.org/media/release.cfm?releaseID=1019). To find out more information about "No Place Like Home" visit Family Builders at [www.familybuilders.org/services.html](http://www.familybuilders.org/services.html) or call (510) 272-0204.**