

The Struggles of Homeless Trans Youth

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Homeless LGBT youth face increased difficulties compared to their heterosexual counterparts both on the streets and within the shelter system, according to a study the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force report, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness," which was released in January 2007.

According to the report, LGBT homeless youth are more vulnerable to mental health issues, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior and victimization. The report states, "A study of homeless youth in Canada found that those who identify as LGBT were three times as likely to participate in survival sex than their heterosexual peers," and The National Runaway Switchboard reported, "LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of crime."

Shelter systems do not ease many of these risks for LGBT teens. "The majority of existing shelters and other care systems are not providing safe and effective services to LGBT homeless youth," the report states.

For trans youth the barriers increase. "Transgender youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population. More generally, some reports indicate that one in five transgender individuals need or are at risk of needing homeless shelter assistance. However, most shelters are segregated by birth sex, regardless of the individuals gender identity, and homeless transgender youth are even ostracized by some agencies that serve their LGB peers," according to the document.

Trans youth experience and fear violence, harassment and discrimination within the shelters and, for many, staying in a shelter can be less safe than spending the night on the street.

Over the past few years, individuals working with homeless youth in Chicago note several positive changes for LGB teens, as more shelters work to understand the complex issues facing these youth; however, trans youth are still experiencing disturbing difficulties.

"I think all of the youth shelter programs are cognizant of the fact that LGBT youth are a huge proportion of this epidemic, and I think they're trying harder than ever, especially in the last 5 to 7 years, to make sure their spaces are affirming and safe for LGBT individuals. I think the trans piece is still the complicated piece," explained Joe Hollendoner, director of the Howard Brown Broadway Youth Center.

"I feel like they are very committed to making space that is safe to LGBT young people, however, I think again, that the shelter system reflects a larger societal issue, if we have a culture that perpetuates heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia then, clearly our shelter program is going to perpetuate that, compounded with issues of race and class," he said.

Myrl Beam, also of Howard Brown, echoes Hollendoner's statements, explaining how issues of employment discrimination, violence at school, homophobia, transphobia, and racism as well as police harassment create several more barriers towards healthy development for trans youth.

Employers do not understand transgender individuals and compounding that with homelessness also creates a nearly impossible situation in the work place. Barbara Bolsen, vice president of programs for The Night Ministry, explained what she has seen over her many years serving homeless youth, "I think when you are a young person and you are trying to understand yourself, your identity and who you are, it can be a hard thing to be doing that and also to be homeless and trying to figure out how to support yourself. I certainly saw for some of those young people, it was hard for them to get jobs and keep jobs. Particularly if they were at a period where they were just starting to figure out which identity to be and to live as."

Another significant barrier is police harassment. Beam said that the LGBT community could help protect trans youth by holding police accountable. She also said, "As a queer community we need to really take on the work of transforming our minds and our lives in our communities and our businesses and actually make opportunities available for trans people. We need to take on the cause of dismantling transphobia."

Funding for more beds and services is also a vital component to help homeless youth. "The need far outweighs the resources in the crisis moment, when young people need some place to go in the dead of winter, there is nowhere, so it forces young people to make unsafe decisions, which puts them in contact with the criminal justice system through no fault of their own, because there are no other choices. So, increasing the number of beds is critical and then making sure those beds are accessible to trans youth," Beam explained.

At this point, federal and local funding for homeless youth shelters and services does not come close to meeting the projected need, which means that while many individuals working with homeless youth here in Chicago agree that LGBT specific shelters and services would greatly increase the safety and healthy development of LGBT teens, and trans teens especially, funding just isn't available. Presently in Chicago, there are no LGBT-specific shelters and none planned for the future.

Hollendoner said, "I think in the current landscape of things it's important that we ensure that the beds that exist now are safe for LGBT individuals and specifically for trans individuals. I think the experiences of trans youth within shelter programs are particularly concerning to me and to my colleagues. I think it is critically important that our existing beds are safe for everyone. I also believe that if resources became available that having a shelter program specifically for LGBT youth would be a wonderful asset to the community ... [but], I think it's really important not just to develop an LGBT homeless youth center and say okay well that's where all the homeless LGBT youth go and not hold other shelter programming accountable to making sure LGBT youth are safe in their shelter."

Another aspect of providing safe housing is transforming the way the shelter systems categorize youth. Hollendoner said, "I think that so often our shelter programs are based on a binary gender system and I think that throughout the youth community you see that binary gender systems aren't the way in which youth describe their bodies and that there's a fluidity around gender now and I think that the shelter programs are now just beginning to understand that."

Sol Flores, executive director of La Casa Norte, explained how the Solid Ground Supportive Housing Program, a project-based housing unit specifically serving male youth aged 16-21 that is part of La Casa Norte, is approaching housing transitioning youth: "We created eligibility guidelines in the transgender area that say if you identify and are living currently as a male you can come into the program, because it is a male intentional program...we could have someone who is going through the transition as long as he is identifying as and living as a male."

Solid Ground's private room system also provides privacy for its residents, which Flores believes has a positive impact allowing for privacy that many sheltered youth don't receive.

Training and education for staff was also cited as a way to decrease discrimination. "I certainly think that training is a very positive thing. ... It creates a better environment for everybody," Bolsen said.