

Proactive Inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Survivors of Sexual Violence

Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and/or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual) often experience sexual violence at a higher rate than those who identify as heterosexual and cisgender (someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth). While research is limited on the prevalence of sexual violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals, available data shows that half of all transgender people have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lifetime, and are at highest risk for this violence during their childhood and adolescence.

Other commonly cited statistics indicate that 46% of lesbian women, 75% of bisexual women, 40% of gay men, and 47% of bisexual men have experienced sexual violence (Quinn, 2011). Crimes of sexual violence are vastly underreported for many reasons, including shame and embarrassment, fear of not being believed, and lack of trust in the system. These barriers are compounded for LGBTQIA+ survivors due to discomfort in seeking law enforcement support, the mishandling of cases, fear of discrimination, and higher law enforcement officer assault rates (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016).

Despite this prevalence of sexual violence, individuals within LGBTQIA+ communities often don't receive the

services they need; they may not feel welcome at sexual assault programs, which are often not fully prepared to meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ survivors. This can be true even when LGBTQIA+ people are staff members. A 2015 study found that about half of the surveyed domestic and sexual violence organizations indicated that they were "minimally prepared" to serve transgender clients (Seelman, 2015). Additionally, many LGBTQIA+ individuals have reported being excluded from services or mistreated by service providers. Some examples of this are: service providers using incorrect pronouns, asking inappropriate questions about the survivor's body, "outing" the survivor (sharing someone's sexual orientation or gender identity without permission), and blaming the assault on the survivor's identity.

Becoming Prepared

Creating a more inclusive organization takes some examination. Many organizations are tempted to begin advertising their acceptance of all people without making the appropriate preparations. While putting up a welcoming sign or sticker is a wonderful addition, it should only be displayed after updating policies and service practices and training staff.

① Policies

Take a look at the gendered language used in your agency's name, website, written materials, and policies. Sometimes making adjustments in language, such as pronouns, can help change the culture of your organization and communicate inclusion to clients, staff, volunteers, and funders. Update your agency's non-discrimination policy for clients and staff that includes the protected categories of sex, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation. These policies should be displayed and easily accessible to all; many people look for these policies when applying for jobs. You can also advertise job openings in LGBTQIA+ friendly media.

② Direct Service Practices

Ensuring that your direct service staff is using the best practices and maintaining LGBTQIA+ competency is one of the most important components of inclusion. Staff should receive regular training related to identity and access. It may be helpful to build relationships with your local LGBTQIA+ community center. Participating in community events and meetings can also be a good way to build relationships and increase knowledge. Do not assume that it is the responsibility of LGBTQIA+ staff members to train their peers – trainings should be prioritized in the same way as other topics, and trainers should be paid for their time and expertise.

While working in a program, staff should avoid outing a survivor to others. Use gender neutral language, ask about identity and pronoun use, and mirror the language a survivor is using to identify themselves and their experiences. Providing services that are specific to LGBTQIA+ clients, such as an LGBTQIA+ support group, can also be very beneficial.

③ Organizational Environment

The environment and atmosphere of your organization is important to consider for inclusion. Before you put up that sticker or sign, make sure you have done the work. There are many changes you can make to your organizational environment to make it more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ people.

- Have a LGBTQIA+ resource guide available for clients.
- Modify all documents, including surveys and intake forms, to be inclusive to all genders and sexual orientations .
- Include questions about LGBTQIA+ access in interview questions for potential new employees.
 - Ensure that bathrooms are safe and accessible.
 - Make LGBTQIA+ books, resources, and brochures available to survivor.
 - Display LGBTQIA+ inclusive posters, images, and materials in the office and at events.
 - Include LGBTQIA+ examples and discussion in all prevention education and outreach presentations.

④ Expectations and Outcomes

While inclusion work is often accompanied by fear of backlash or conflict with our community, more often the positive responses outweigh the negative. Some positive outcomes of taking a proactive approach to LGBTQIA+ competency and inclusion may be:

- Improved services and increased reach
- Increased community support, alliances, and partnerships
- Exceeding the non-discrimination requirements of many funders
- Potential for additional funding due to inclusion work or to continue and expand inclusion
- Improving the overall confidence, knowledge, and empowerment of staff, volunteers, and interns

Increasing access for LGBTQIA+ survivors is an ongoing process, and an important one. We want survivors from many different identities and cultures to feel more comfortable accessing our services, and these steps can help in creating a more inclusive agency.

Understanding the Basics

One of the biggest barriers for LGBTQIA+ survivors is that service providers often lack knowledge about the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities and survivors.

Maintaining a working knowledge of the basic information and terminology behind these identities is important. The language we use to describe our relationship with our own gender and sexual orientation continues to grow and change. More important than the providers' knowledge of specific terms is the providers' willingness to understand that each individual has an experience that is unique to them. You can do this both by not making assumptions and by using the language and terms your client prefers.

Important considerations include:

- Being able to identify the differences between orientation (who you love), behavior/expression (what you do/think), and identity (what you call yourself), as well as understanding that one of these things does not implicate another. For example, we can't always know someone's sexual orientation by observing their gender expression.
- Understanding the differences between sex assigned at birth (a classification typically based on genitalia, hormones, chromosomes, sex organs) and gender identity (someone's internal sense of self as female, male, nonbinary, and other genders on or beyond the spectrum of masculinity and femininity).



they

them

their

Gender Inclusive Language

We use gender-neutral language all the time in our work – we say that people are survivors, clients, and partners. We can expand this to increase access to LGBTQIA+ clients by choosing to use gender neutral pronouns like “they/them/their” when first meeting or talking about people, or by simply using someone’s name until we are able to ask which pronouns to use. This can be normalized by opening with a statement such as, “out of respect for all of our clients, we like to give you the opportunity to determine how you identify. May I ask what pronouns you would like me to refer to you with?” Another option is to say, “I use ‘she’ and ‘her’ gender pronouns, what about you?” Creating a culture within your agency where this is a normal and expected thing to do will benefit your clients and staff who are LGBTQIA+.

Additional Resources

- [Forge Forward](http://forge-forward.org)
<http://forge-forward.org>
- [The Network/La Red](http://tnlr.org/en)
<http://tnlr.org/en>
- [Mazzoni Center](https://www.mazzonicenter.org)
<https://www.mazzonicenter.org>
- [Human Rights Campaign](https://www.hrc.org/resources/topic/workplace)
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/topic/workplace>
- [Equality PA](http://www.equalitypa.org)
<http://www.equalitypa.org>
- [CenterLink](https://www.lgbtcenters.org)
<https://www.lgbtcenters.org>
- [2015 U.S. Transgender Survey](http://www.ustranssurvey.org)
<http://www.ustranssurvey.org>
- [Demonstrate Access](https://www.demonstrateaccess.org)
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