

# Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ Youth Programs

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## Collaboration Overview

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The [Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ \(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer\) Youth Project](#) is a collaborative effort that originated in Multnomah County, Oregon, and focuses on training staff and encouraging policy changes to provide unbiased services for LGBTQ youth in in-home and out-of-home care settings.

The collaboration structure includes:

- An established, representative, advisory committee that meets on an ongoing basis
- An effort to share its message by presenting at conferences
- Strategic partnerships with organizations that are experienced in the subject matter

Best practices include:

- Involving allies and advocates from a variety of organizations and perspectives on the advisory committee
- Securing support from key advocates within the systems
- Recognizing how to navigate the political nuances and organizational objectives
- Ensuring training materials are easily available

The collaboration has faced a number of challenges and learned the following lessons:

- There is a lack of data in this area.
- Instability within partner organizations can slow down the process.
- It can be a challenge to find funders to support the work.
- It is important to develop a plan to establish local buy-in and reach out to local organizations and champions when trying to expand.

## Collaboration Purpose

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The mission of the collaboration is to train staff and encourage organizational policy changes to provide unbiased services for LGBTQ youth in in-home and out-of-home care settings. The collaboration has predominately focused its efforts on out-of-home care including juvenile justice detention, foster care placements, and homeless shelters. The primary goal is to support organizational policy changes and trainings so that organizations will be better able to meet the needs and improve the outcomes for LGBTQ youth as well as others that the organizations serve.

## About the Collaboration

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The Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ Youth Project is a local collaboration that began in 2004 as a Juvenile Justice Committee focused on researching the state of in- and out-of-home services for LGBTQ youth. This committee was established through the support of the Equity Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Portland, Oregon, that's mission is to support and ensure equality across all sexual and gender orientations, and the dedication of a defense lawyer in Portland who had recognized the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in her clients. A 2008 Juvenile Justice Summit held in Portland brought together over 40 agencies to brainstorm challenges faced in trying to best serve LGBTQ youth. Portland State University's Regional Research Institute for Human Services was invited to participate in the summit to provide an academic presence and to support an evaluation of the effort. Summit participants identified a need for basic understanding and training in working with LGBTQ youth and subsequently the Equity Foundation established an advisory committee that represents researchers, lawyers, community advocates, child welfare workers, juvenile justice staff, and homeless youth services providers.

The advisory committee applied for a United Way grant in order to establish the Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ Youth Project and develop a model training program to help staff in social service and criminal justice organizations provide unbiased services for LGBTQ youth. Trainings were provided to a subset of Multnomah Child Welfare staff, staff from the Homeless "Continuum" (New Avenues for Youth, Outside In, Janus Youth, NAYA Family Center), and staff from Multnomah County Juvenile Justice. While the collaboration started at the local level within Multnomah County, the hope is that trainings will expand to include service providers across the state and eventually become mandatory for service providers in order to increase their knowledge about LGBTQ youth.

## Collaboration Structure

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The collaboration is supported by the following:

### **An established, representative advisory committee that meets on an ongoing basis**

The advisory committee, established after the 2008 Juvenile Justice Summit, consists of members of:

- The Equity Foundation
- Multnomah County Child Welfare
- Multnomah County Juvenile Justice
- Portland State University
- The Homeless “Continuum” (New Avenues for Youth, Outside In, Janus Youth, NAYA Family Center)
- Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC)
- Legal representatives

The advisory committee communicates regularly both through e-mail and in-person meetings. Advisory committee meetings are held at least quarterly, if not more often, to plan next steps and discuss challenges.

### **An effort to share its message by presenting at conferences**

Following trainings in Multnomah County, the collaboration is looking to spread the word about the trainings and the importance of the topic by presenting a workshop specifically focused on gender-nonconforming youth at the 2012 [Meaningful Care Conference](#), which attracts attendees from across the state. In order to spread the trainings to service providers across the state, the collaboration is hoping to establish champions or advocates for the work in other counties. In addition, it provides free downloads of all its training materials online.

### **Strategic partnerships with organizations that are experienced in the subject matter**

The trainings supported by the collaboration were developed and delivered by partners from SMYRC and Portland State University’s Regional Research Institute for Human Services with key subject matter expertise in LGBTQ issues. SMYRC, a nonprofit organization focused on working with LGBTQ youth through empowerment, community building, education and direct services, provided a background and overview of LGBTQ issues. The Regional Research Institute for Human Services conducts research and evaluation with the goal of improving peoples' lives through better human services, supports, and policies. The Regional Research Institute provided expertise in evaluation and helped to develop training materials for the project.

## Promising Practices

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The following practices have helped the Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ Youth Project to be successful in working collaboratively and achieving results.

### **Allies and advocates from a variety of organizations and perspectives are represented within the advisory committee**

The collaboration has been able to establish a team of allies and advocates that represent the diverse array of partner organizations on its advisory board, including child welfare, juvenile justice, higher education, and the homeless population . The collaboration ensures that people with these different perspectives are at the table and have an equal voice as they discuss next steps and express their concerns and goals.

The diverse array of partners has benefited the collaboration as each brings its own skills, perspectives, connections, and expertise. For example, having an academic institution involved has helped to provide a level of credibility that can be beneficial in opening doors with decision makers, while having grassroots organizations has brought a level of understanding about the realities of LGBTQ youth in the community.

### **Support from key advocates within the systems**

Having strong allies on the advisory committee is important, but the collaboration has also found that it is essential to have allies that help carry out and support the work from inside the system. For example, the collaboration has a strong ally within Multnomah County Juvenile Justice who helped to establish, schedule, and tailor the trainings to ensure that they meet the needs of its juvenile justice system. She was also a strong advocate for getting its director on board and helped navigate the political changes and reorganizations that occurred within the organization.

One of the key advocates that the collaboration was able to establish was the former director of Multnomah County Juvenile Justice. Through his role, he was able to mandate that all of the staff in the Multnomah County Juvenile Justice Department participate in the training.

### **Recognizing how to navigate the political nuances and organizational objectives**

Recognizing how to frame the training objectives so they fit with the missions and mandates of the organizations was essential for the success of the training. For example, the collaboration benefited from being able to adapt the training objectives to reflect the key language and align with the professional development policies of the Multnomah County Juvenile Justice.

### **Ensuring training materials are easily available**

While the collaboration does not actively market its training materials or track page views on its website, all of the training materials, including PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and additional resources, are available online for free download and use. It also makes its materials available in a binder and in CD format for local organizations and entities interested in the training.

## Lessons Learned

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The Providing Unbiased Services for LGBTQ Youth Project has learned the following lessons through the challenges they have faced.

### **There is a lack of data in this area**

One challenge that the collaboration faces is a lack of data and information on LGBTQ youth, specifically gender-nonconforming youth and youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. This is a problem in Oregon and the nation as a whole. While there are some data showing that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless population, data about overrepresentation in other systems are not as clearly established. One reason for the lack of data on this population is that youth often don't feel safe disclosing their sexual or gender preference. In addition, when data are available, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth are often lumped together as one category, therefore not capturing the distinct experiences of each population. For example, as many out-of-home placements are segregated by sex, it can create unique challenges for gender-nonconforming youth.

Information is slowly becoming more available, but it is still heavily reliant on anecdotal information or case studies rather than large-scale data collection and analysis. The lack of data and information on this population of youth both at the national and local level makes it difficult to show that

- More efforts and funding needs to be targeted at this population.
- Action should be taken to help eliminate the disproportionate representation of LGBTQ youth in the juvenile justice, homeless, and child welfare populations.
- Efforts need to be taken to ensure that LGBTQ youth experience a safe and supportive environment.

### **Instability within partner organizations can slow down the process**

The collaboration has faced a number of reorganizational challenges in recent years. Multnomah County Juvenile Justice recently underwent reorganization and a shift in its leadership due to budget cuts. While the previous director was a key advocate for the collaboration, making the training mandatory for all staff, new leadership has a different background, approach, and priorities. Another shift in the collaboration's structure occurred when the executive director of SMYRC moved out of state and SMYRC merged with another organization—the Q Center, a community center supporting all LGBTQ people, not just youth. SMYRC developed and delivered part of the training, so their organization changes raised questions of who would provide that piece of the training going forward though the collaboration hopes that SMYRC will continue to be a training partner. As some of the partner organizations were in flux, the collaboration recognized that while it is important to ensure its presence is still felt, it is also important to allow the partner organizations to stabilize and reestablish buy-in prior to trying to expand their efforts and make large demands of the partner organizations.

## **It can be difficult to find funders to support the work**

The collaboration was able to secure initial funding for trainings through a grant with the United Way, but it continues to struggle to find additional funds to expand and sustain its efforts. The Equity Foundation, as a partner in the collaboration, has been able to provide some funding to sustain the work of the collaboration, but securing additional funding and deciding which partner should be the key applicant continues to be difficult.

## **Plan to establish local buy-in and reach out to local organizations and champions**

As Oregon is a large state with distinct cities and rural areas, the collaboration recognized it would be important to work with local communities rather than imposing its views and values on communities across the state in a top-down manner. As it plans to expand the trainings to audiences throughout the state, the collaboration is cognizant of the importance of establishing local buy-in, developing local advocates, and generating local partners to support the work of the collaboration.

## **Accomplishments**

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The project trained 107 service providers in Multnomah County that work with youth. As a result of the trainings, the participating organizations have seen an increase in awareness and shifts in organizational attitudes. Specifically:

- Most respondents, even those who had previously shown resistance, expressed that they had learned something they could apply to practice.
- Safe zone signs have been posted throughout Multnomah County Juvenile Justice Department, and few have been removed despite a history of the signs being torn down prior to the training.
- Multnomah County Child Welfare made recommendations that are currently in the approval process to alter the intake forms that are used in order to support gender-nonconforming youth. This includes providing a place for the name that they prefer to be called and separating questions for assigned sex and gender.
- The Homeless Continuum continues to provide services that have been responsive to LGBTQ youth.

