



**Combating Discrimination:  
An Action Kit for Feminists against LGBT  
Homelessness**

## Dear NOW Leaders,

In 2011, NOW resolved to instruct chapter leaders on how to locate and publicize resources for LGBTQ youth who may face or be at risk for homelessness. This action kit was created to support the resolution, and aims to help chapters raise awareness about a critical issue and help those in their communities.

Youth homelessness continues to be a serious issue: every year, between 1.6 million and 2 million young people in the U.S. are listed as homeless or runaways. Although LGBT youth compose up to 10 percent of young people in the general population, it is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth are LGBT.

Moreover, LGBT homeless youth face obstacles that directly stem from reactions to their sexuality and/or gender identity. The majority of youth who are homeless are so because of family conflict. LGBT youth face the particular problem of frequent rejection by their biological or foster families. Many are kicked out of their houses or necessarily escape because of ensuing physical or sexual abuse. Indeed, one third of all LGBT youth report being assaulted by a family member as a result of coming out. LGBT youth in the foster system often face multiple placements with hostile group homes and other foster placements; others ‘age out’ of the system and are left with few resources and nowhere to go. Because young people are coming out at increasingly earlier ages, they must endure the subsequent risks at earlier ages. Homelessness makes it especially difficult for LGBT youth to complete an education; thus, they do not have access to jobs that pay a living wage.

The difficulties that all homeless youth face are only magnified for those who are LGBT. Homeless LGBT young people are more likely to be addicted to drugs, and more likely to have mental health issues, and commit suicide at higher rates than their straight counterparts. They are at a higher risk for suffering sexual abuse on the street and also are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors to obtain basic needs such as food and shelter -- and subsequently contract HIV/AIDS at a higher rate.

Additionally, they have greater barriers in accessing services. There already is a severe national shortage of homeless shelters and programs due to a lack of proper funding. Shelters that house young people are even scarcer, and are all too often unaccommodating or outright unreceptive to LGBT youth. Studies report that some shelters even take such measures as placing them in flagged rooms as a “safety” precaution for the other residents. Shelters that are segregated by sex regularly refuse to let transgender youth stay with the gender that they identify with -- which in turn highly increases their risk of physical and sexual assault by other residents.

The issue of LGBT homelessness is a multifaceted one, influenced by such factors as homophobia, essentialist ideas of gender, and economic injustice. NOW’s commitment to ending discrimination in all forms makes us natural allies to this cause. In this document, we list helpful resources for homeless LGBT youth as well as suggestions for how your chapter can make a difference. We hope that this action kit helps you to advocate for homeless LGBT youth: that you will have the resources to make referrals to those who need them, educate the public about this issue, and promote beneficial legislation. No child deserves a life where every day is a struggle to survive, where the search for adequate food and shelter is a desperate one. LGBT youth experience this sort of life in alarmingly high numbers, and our efforts can help them not only survive but have hope for the future.

*Statistics credited to: Quitana et al (2010); Ray (2006) and the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009). All of these publications are available in “Further Reading” at the end of this document.*

## **Resources for Homeless LGBT Youth**

Be sure to have these resources at hand for people who contact your chapter! Just being able to make a referral to someone in need can make a huge difference. You can additionally give this list to any other organization that would find it useful (schools, local LGBT groups, other feminist organizations, etc.).

### **Hotlines (All of these hotlines are toll-free.)**

*Lambda Legal’s LGBT Teen Hotline: 1-866 LGBTeen (1-866-542-8336)*

Lambda Legal is the oldest and largest national legal organization working for the rights of LGBT people as well as people who are living with HIV/AIDS. Teens can call this number if they are experiencing problems with homelessness, the foster care system, and/or the juvenile justice system. The line is staffed (Pacific Standard Time) Monday-Friday, 6:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m. [9-5:30, Eastern], but callers may leave messages 24/7.

*The National Runaway Switchboard: 1-800-RUNAWAY*

The organization serves as the federally designated national communication system for runaway and homeless youth. While not specifically LGBT, it identifies itself as LGBT-friendly. This 24/7 number can be used for crisis calls (before and after running away) or to locate local help from social service agencies and organizations. Concerned parents of runaways also may call this number.

*The Trevor Lifeline: 1-866-488-7386 <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>*

Although The Trevor Project does not have youth homelessness programs, this organization is helpful for its work to reduce teen suicide amongst LGBT youth. Their number is online 24/7 and trained volunteers provide LGBT youth in crisis with phone counseling that could be vital for a suicidal teen. Teens can also ask questions on the Trevor Project’s website. Options include Ask Trevor (which allows the person to send an anonymous email-type message) or anonymous instant messaging. The website also links to [trevorspace.org](http://trevorspace.org), which is a social site for LGBT youth aged 13-24.

### **Lists of Services Friendly to LGBT Youth (some may overlap)**

Many LGBT young people (homeless and not) have had negative experiences with various service providers. This negativity often fosters distrust and so discourages them from seeking help. Below are several websites that list known LGBT-centered or LGBT-friendly service providers. Services vary per organization, and not all of them have the capacity to provide housing. Some offer emergency shelter, a place for meals and showers, and/or transitional living. Other services include health counseling, support groups, and STD/HIV testing.

- The True Colors Fund’s “Forty to None Project,” recently started by Cyndi Lauper, is collecting service providers to make it easy for LGBT teens to find organizations near them. This link takes you to the overall list of these groups in a state-by-state order. If you know of

others, encourage them to add themselves to this list! Each group provides a description of the services it offers.

<http://fortytonone.org/get-involved/support-your-local-service-provider/find-a-local-provider/>

- Lambda Legal’s “Resources for LGBT Youth” fact sheet provides national resources as well as state-by-state ones:  
[http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/fs\\_resources-for-lgbtq-youth](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/fs_resources-for-lgbtq-youth) [web location]  
[http://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/fs\\_resources-for-lgbtq-youth.pdf](http://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/fs_resources-for-lgbtq-youth.pdf) [pdf document]

## Making Resources Accessible

### Free materials to distribute:

- The National Runaway Switchboard provides several materials that specifically target LGBT youth: a poster advertising the NRS phone number and an LGBT brochure advertising the organization’s services. These materials can be downloaded for immediate use or ordered as hard copies.  
[http://www.1800runaway.org/promote/promotional\\_materials/](http://www.1800runaway.org/promote/promotional_materials/)
- Lambda Legal’s poster highlights its phone number for LGBT teens who are homeless, are in the foster system, and/or those who are in the juvenile justice system.  
<http://data.lambdalegal.org/pdf/117.pdf>
- Cyndi Lauper’s True Color’s Fund also has a project called the “Give a Damn” campaign, which seeks to encourage more people to become activists on LGBT rights. On its website, there are personal stories about and by LGBT homeless youth. Encourage people to read these stories! They can be used as an educational tool or just a way for LGBT youth to know that they aren’t alone.  
<http://www.wegiveadamn.org/category/youth-homelessness/>
- Create your own materials! You can include national statistics but further focus on how your state and local policies and organizations impact LGBT homeless youth.
  - Suggestions: brochures, posters/fliers, bookmarks, fact sheets

### Some ideas for reaching young people:

- Partnering with state or local LGBT groups would be helpful in reaching out to young people. They likely have information as to where LGBT youth would most likely be able to access these materials. Larger LGBT groups might have knowledge of more local ones.
- Middle schools and high schools are a potentially important way to reach youth. They might allow you to display posters in areas where students can regularly see them. Counselors and teachers especially might want to have materials on hand, even if they aren’t publicly displayed, so that they can have information to offer to students. Be conscious of the fact that not all schools (public and private) are LGBT-friendly.

- In addition, many high schools now have LGBT student groups (often referred to as ‘gay-straight alliances,’ or GSAs). GSAs can be vital peer support systems for LGBT youth, particularly in schools where they aren’t accepted by other students. Getting information into the hands of LGBT and allied students is valuable; young people who are not “out” might be more upfront and open with friends rather than people in authority positions. These groups might even want to do an awareness program for their peers.
- Colleges and universities frequently have LGBT student organizations and some even have entire centers. Many of these groups either already do or would be interested in doing outreach work to younger LGBT teens. They might want to speak to them about homelessness and/or promote general awareness about LGBT youth homelessness. You could also collaborate with any nearby Campus Action Networks (CANs).

### Promoting awareness and reaching out

You don’t have to limit your target audience to just LGBT homeless youth - inform others and inspire them to act as well!

- First of all, involve and enthuse chapter members! You could distribute fact sheets at chapter meetings and prepare a presentation about LGBT youth homelessness and why this issue is so important. If you have a website and/or social networking page, make available information about LGBT youth homelessness (as well as any relevant events you are planning). If you are describing issues such as dating violence, try to use gender neutral language to be inclusive of same-sex relationships. Doing so will help to make clear that you are a safe space for LGBT adults and youth to contact and/or work with.
- Do you know of any students who want to start a gay-straight alliance but don’t know how to? Tell them to check out the GSANetworks’s “Ten Steps for Starting a GSA” at the below link. Groups may also look at GLSEN’s “Jump-Start Guide for Gay-Straight Alliances” for further details about GSAs. Because not all schools will be receptive to the idea, remember that under the Federal Equal Access Act, **all** schools that receive government funding and have at least one other non-curricular club **must also allow a GSA**.  
<https://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/10-steps-starting-gsa>  
<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2226.html?state=tools&type=student>
- Not all youth services and/or shelters are well-informed about how to make their organizations LGBT-friendly. Other organizations might even be blatantly discriminatory. If possible, encourage service providers to be knowledgeable and accepting of their LGBT population.
  - To determine if the organization is LGBT-friendly, you could ask to meet with a staffer who’s knowledgeable about the organization’s policies. Ask about how they handle LGBT youth and further if they have enforced non-discrimination policies in place. The organization should be forthcoming in these questions, particularly if you explain how you are dedicated to helping young people.
  - If possible, you can also seek out feedback from young people who have attended the organization. Utilize any contacts with local LGBT organizations - even if you can’t speak with an attendee, there may be an overall consensus about how the staff operates and the general atmosphere of the place. Non-LGBT youth additionally might have helpful input.

- You can present service providers with the following publications if they express interest in making positive changes within their organizations:
  - *National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Youth*  
This publication was created by several LGBT-friendly organizations. It is in an easy to read format and also contains a glossary of helpful LGBT terms.  
<http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/NationalRecommended.pdf>
  - *Transitioning Our Shelters*  
For youth shelters that are serious about examining and changing their policies, this longer publication is a comprehensive guide that outlines how to ensure that shelters are friendly to LGB and specifically transgender youth.  
<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/TransitioningOurShelters.pdf>
  
- Public libraries are useful places to raise awareness of LGBT homelessness and the services available. Many LGBT homeless youth visit libraries for free access to computers and the internet. Many public libraries have spaces where you can display materials. Be sure to ask the librarians if and where you can make materials available, and be aware that some librarians may be reluctant to have them too openly displayed; in many places, any subject concerning LGBT people is considered “controversial.” Open spaces may include bulletin boards, racks for brochures and fact sheets, and display cases.
  - Public libraries are useful places to raise awareness of LGBT homelessness and the services available. Many LGBT homeless youth visit libraries for free access to computers and the internet. Public libraries have spaces where you can display materials and so educate the general public as well. Be sure to ask the librarians if and where you can make materials available, and be aware that some librarians may be reluctant to have them too openly displayed; in many places, any subject concerning LGBT people is considered “controversial.” Open spaces may include bulletin boards, racks for brochures and fact sheets, and display cases.
  - You might create bookmarks as a way to distribute information to regular patrons of the library. People always need bookmarks and will take them especially if you can place them where books are checked out.
  
- Tabling events is a way to reach a wider audience. It allows you not only to give people materials but also engage them in meaningful conversations. Here are some recommendations for your tabling practices:
  - The most effective events to table are ones that will guarantee you a lot of foot traffic. Art and musical festivals, any community celebrations (such as the Fourth of July), conferences, and political events are several suggestions.
  - Contact the event organizers in advance if you want to have a table and/or distribute any pamphlets! Ask if there are registration fees and if a table will be provided.
  - Social justice rallies are great places to get information out to dedicated activists and other interested people. You can also potentially counter-protest any hateful rallies, particularly if they are specifically directed against LGBT people. Homophobic and transphobic events can even be helpful in an odd way, as they can cause a heightened awareness and interest of LGBT issues.
  - Your tabling doesn’t have to exclusively focus on LGBT youth homelessness. If you are tabling for different reasons (such as promoting your chapter) you can always include materials concerning LGBT youth in your display.

- As well as distributing information, you could use tabling to get in touch with volunteers for LGBT organizations.
- If possible, bring candy to attract more people! You could create a trivia game about LGBT youth homelessness and give the candy as a reward for participation.
- LGBT pride parades and celebrations are other events that guarantee you access to a large pool of LGBT people and allies who are sympathetic to this cause. Pride events can happen throughout the year, but the largest celebrations usually take place around June. There are numerous possibilities for these events.
  - You could have a float in the parade itself -- many places have registration fees, but others (particularly in smaller towns) do not charge, although you may need to register well ahead of time. You could also buy vendor space if there are celebration areas after the parade. Fees for these events are sometimes lessened for non-profit groups.
  - Some parades will let you simply walk around and distribute materials. HOWEVER, always be sure to call the organizers and check to make sure that you have permission!

## **A Nationwide Struggle**

Another way to support LGBT homeless youth is to advocate for their rights by changing local, state and federal policies. Change on the national front is particularly important, as states vary in their attitudes toward LGBT people and economic rights. Below are several federal bills that would help homeless LGBT youth across the country.

### **Change at the Federal Level**

- *Every Child Deserves A Family Act (H.R.1681; S. 1770)*

Introduced in both the House and Senate in 2011, this legislation would allow same-sex couples and single LGBT people across the country to adopt and foster children. It would therefore negate the many state laws that currently discriminate against same-sex adopting and fostering (including those states that completely prohibit their access to these practices). More loving homes would be open to kids in the foster system: homes that would be a much safer place for LGBT youth.

- *Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2012 (S. 3453)*

Raising the minimum wage would allow more LGBT homeless youth (who are at greater risk for not finishing high school and higher education) to earn a higher income in unskilled jobs, in turn improving their ability to support themselves. The Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2012, for instance, would increase the federal minimum wage to \$9.80 per hour. This bill has been introduced in both the House and Senate.

- *The Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act (S. 961)*

Under this legislation, the Secretary of Health and Human Services would be tasked with developing programs to improve family relationships with LGBT youth. It was introduced in 2011 by Senator John Kerry (D) as part of a larger bill dealing with youth homelessness and the foster system.

- *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act*

This legislation is already a vital source of funds for serving runaway and homeless youth. However, it allocates funds to certain services and shelters (including strict religious ones) that are highly

discriminatory toward LGBT youth. This law needs to be amended to ensure that acceptance of federal funds is contingent upon being inclusive of LGBT youth. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force suggests mandating that all agencies seeking federal funding must demonstrate awareness of LGBT issues and have a clear nondiscrimination policy on record. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act also must be given significantly higher funds to meet the needs of the youth homeless population.

## **Change at the State and Local Level**

The ideas in many of these federal laws can also be applied at the state level. Raising the state's minimum wage, making funding available only to nondiscriminatory agencies, and allowing LGBT people the full rights to foster and adopt are several examples. Other ideas that can be applied at the state/local level:

- Research your state to see if it has general anti-discrimination laws that fully protect LGBT people (especially those covering housing, employment, public accommodations and state services); if not, advocate for such laws to be put in place. LGBT-friendly anti-discrimination laws should cover sexual orientation, HIV status, and gender identity and/or expression.
- Access to comprehensive medical care is particularly critical for LGBT homeless youth, who are as a whole at a high risk for mental health issues and other health problems. The Affordable Care Act of 2010 gives the option for states to expand Medicaid coverage to all people under 65 who receive an income of up to 133% of the federal poverty level. This expansion goes into effect during 2014 and is financed in full by the federal government until 2016. The federal finances taper to 90% for the years 20 and beyond. Because states have the option to not opt into Medicaid expansion (and some have already stated that they will refuse to do so), advocating in favor of the practice is vital.
- Be on the lookout for states' and cities' budget cuts, which can devastate those programs that serve homeless youth. Advocating for greater funding for LGBT-friendly and LGBT-specific homeless youth programs would help to maintain these critical safe spaces.
- Even if states are staunchly anti-LGBT, helpful change can often be enacted at the local level in the form of passing or overturning certain ordinances. Towns and cities may have ordinances that are beneficial to LGBT people or discriminatory toward them. You can search for nondiscrimination policies. Your city/town might have a general sentence expressing that intolerance toward protected groups is forbidden. It might list nondiscrimination policies in specific areas (such as housing or employment).
  - If your town/city has a website, its ordinances are most likely linked to on its front page (different towns/cities have different names for it: "city codes, municipal codes," etc.). A few helpful terms to search are "discrimination," "sexual orientation," "gender identity," "homosexual" and "housing."
- Be additionally aware of efforts to criminalize homelessness. Such efforts may come in the form of banning sleeping and/or lingering in public spaces. Criminalizing homelessness does not address the underlying structural issues that lead to homelessness, instead forcing homeless people (including LGBT youth) into the judicial system rather than receiving the services that they need.



Many of the recommendations listed in this action kit are developed from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s publication on homeless LGBT youth (listed in “Further Reading” below). Elaborations on these recommendations and further ideas can be fully found on pages 153-161.

## Further Reading

### Publications

- The 2006 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s publication, “An Epidemic of Homelessness,” is a long but very thorough look at LGBT homeless youth. It also contains several shelters’ examples of how to create an accommodating environment for them.  
Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.  
<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/HomelessYouth.pdf>
- The Center for American Progress created the 2010 publication “On the Street.” It also gives extensive information about LGBT homeless youth and policy recommendations.  
Quitana, N.S., Rosenthal, J., & Krehely, J. (2010). *On the Street: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth*. *Center for American Progress*.  
<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/pdf/lgbtyouthhomelessness.pdf>  
-Shortened versions of this document can be found at:  
[http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/on\\_the\\_streets.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/on_the_streets.html)
- The National Alliance to End Homelessness created this “LGBTQ Homeless Fact Sheet.” It lists information about LGBTQ homeless youth. Among its information is a one-page fact sheet that would make a good material to distribute.  
From: National Coalition for the Homeless. (2009). *LGBT Homeless*. *National Coalition for the Homeless*.  
<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/LGBTQhomelessFactSheetbyNAEH.pdf>
- At the research section of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s website, searching the term “homeless” under the “youth” issue in the drop-down bar will turn up a number of fact sheets about homeless LGBT youth for several states and large cities. This part of the website also contains many other reports on LGBT issues.  
[http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports\\_and\\_research/fact\\_sheets?title=homeless&tid=2595](http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/fact_sheets?title=homeless&tid=2595)

### Glossary of Key LGBT-Related Terms\*

**Ally** - Someone who seeks to better understand LGBTQ people and actively opposes forms of intolerance against them. It is most often used to describe heterosexual people.

**Asexual** – A person who is not sexually attracted to anyone or does not have a sexual orientation.

**Bisexual** – A person emotionally and/or sexually attracted to men and women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

**Cisgender (adj.)** - Someone who conforms to societal gender-based expectations. It is mostly used to describe non-transgender people. (Also referred to as “cis.”)

**Gay** – A man who is attracted to men in an emotional and/or sexual sense. Not all men who are interested in men identify as gay. “Gay” also sometimes refers to the LGBTQ community and individuals as a whole, although this is often considered non-inclusive.

**Genderqueer** – A person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. Many people identify as such to challenge gender stereotypes and the idea that only two genders exist.

**Heteronormativity** - The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that heterosexuality (and with it strongly defined social and gender roles) is the best and most “normal” form of sexuality.

**Intersex** - A person whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, and/or genitals makes it difficult to categorize the person as male or female. A formerly used term that is now considered offensive is “hermaphrodite.”

**Lesbian** - A woman who is attracted to other women in an emotional and/or sexual sense. Not all women who are interested in women identify as lesbians.

**LGBT** – A common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, serving as a way to refer to all non-straight, not-trans people. There are many variations of this term. Other letters might include Q (for ‘questioning’ or ‘queer’), A (for asexual and/or ally), and TS or 2S (for Two-Spirited). LGBT and other forms are usually preferred terms to “gay and lesbian community” because they are more inclusive.

**Outing** – Involuntarily disclosing someone’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status; a person can out themselves or be outed by another person. To *be* “out” is to be open about one’s status.

**Queer** - A reclaimed identity that is loosely defined. It often serves as an umbrella term for anyone who does not conform to societal norms in regards to gender and/or sexuality. It is still offensive to some people, however, and is not universally adopted amongst LGBT people.

**Straight** - Another word for “heterosexual.”

**Transgender** – An umbrella term referring to those who live as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity. Other recent forms of the word include trans and trans\*. *Note: the term “tranny” is considered highly offensive to trans people.*

**Two-Spirited** – Native persons who have attributes of both genders and distinct gender and social roles in their tribes (or identify with such roles from indigenous history).

**Ze / Hir / Hirsself** – Alternate pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some gender variant people. Pronounced /zee/ , /here/ and /here-self/, they replace ‘he’/‘she’ , ‘his’/‘hers’ and ‘himself/herself’ respectively. Others might prefer to use “they” and “their” as a singular form instead of “he”/“she” and “his”/“hers” (which is currently grammatically incorrect but sounds more ordinary to many people).

\*Many of these definitions are adapted or used from:

Green, E., & Peterson, E. (2003-2004). LGBTQIA Terminology. *UC San Diego: LGBT Resource Center*.

For further definitions, please visit their page at [http://lgbtro.ucsd.edu/LGBTQIA\\_Terminology.asp#A](http://lgbtro.ucsd.edu/LGBTQIA_Terminology.asp#A)