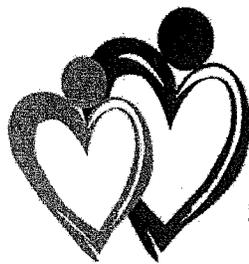


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True Colors

Sexual Minority Youth and Family Services

February 2, 2015: In support of SB 408

My Name is Robin McHaalen. I am the Executive Director of True Colors, Inc. a non-profit agency focused on the unique needs, issues and concerns of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth. I offer the following testimony in support of SB 408: An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness.

I have been working on behalf of LGBTQ youth for more than 20 years. As a result, I have a vested interest in the successful passage of this bill. Research (and my own experience) demonstrates that LGBTQ youth are at significantly higher risk for homelessness. Various studies indicate that while LGBTQ youth represent around 5% of the youth population, they represent as much as 40% of the Homeless Youth population (Williams Institute, 2012). The reasons for their increased risk of homelessness are numerous. The most salient risks are family rejection, school harassment and the constant threat of violence. Youth, themselves, consistently report family conflict as the major reason for their homelessness. In the case of LGBTQ youth, their family's reaction to their sexual orientation or gender identity is often the primary cause of the conflict.

In addition, youth are coming out much earlier than in years past. The average age at which youth disclose is now eleven to thirteen. Ten years ago the average age was nineteen to twenty-one. Developmentally, the difference is significant. If the family or school rejects these children, they have few resources to turn to.

Once homeless, LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of physical and sexual assault, mental health problems and unsafe sexual behaviors than heterosexual homeless youth. LGB homeless youth are twice as likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) as their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent). The attempt rates are even higher for Transgender youth. These youngsters are particularly at risk. They are often turned away from shelters or forced to stay in shelters that don't accept or recognize their gender identity. Both compromise the youth's safety and well-being.

Consider, JD's story. When I first met JD* she was nearly 12 years old and just coming out as a transgender girl. Assigned as male at birth, JD first came into care as a toddler. Gentle and sweet, preferring dolls to trucks and dresses to jeans, JD didn't fit the family's expectations about gender. First JD's parents, then an aunt and uncle with whom JD was placed, tried to beat the femininity out of the child. At five, JD came back into care and was adopted. At 10, JD came out as 'gay' and the family gave "him" back to DCF. Soon after, it became clear that JD wasn't gay at all, but rather, transgender.

She had been a girl all along; it was just that nobody recognized it. Things should have gotten better then. But they didn't. From twelve years old to nineteen, JD was in more than twenty different placements. Each placement meant a loss of emotional connection and educational continuity. Once she reached 18, each of the agencies responsible for providing her with services placed a variety of stipulations upon her that she was unable to meet. Ultimately, her case was closed without her having achieved a high school diploma, or any job skills and reading at about a 4th grade level. Shortly thereafter, JD became homeless. Her IDs, her identity, her gender expression were all female. Yet, the only place that would accept her was a male shelter. JD currently believes that her only option for survival is sex work. She is now 21, living in Atlanta, with a 'boyfriend', doing hair and turning tricks for a living. There are so many ways and places that the system failed this girl...

There isn't much, perhaps, that we can do for JD at this moment in her life. But SB 408 might help us prevent future JD's.

I have seven specific recommendations (several of which are adapted from the 2010 NYC Commission on Homeless and Runaway LGBTQ Youth report to the Mayor.):

1. Require a coordinated agencies approach that includes comprehensive housing, medical, mental health, substance abuse and trauma care for all homeless and runaway youth, including those who are LGBTQ.
2. Ensure that these agencies provide culturally competent programming that is explicitly inclusive of LGBTQ youth.
3. Ensure that the programming is housing first. Homeless and runaway youth must have access to stable housing without the often insurmountable obstacles that current school/job/therapy/substance use requirements place on them.
4. Provide the option for 'permanent' supportive housing for 18 - 24 year olds. Transitional one year housing support is rarely if ever enough for youth like JD with significant trauma and few employment skills.
5. Provide funding and an increased focus on supporting families as their children come out. It is clear that family support is the most important protective factor for LGBT youth. Even small changes in family response have been shown to make a profound difference in the outcomes for youth. We need to develop family and alternative family support strategies across systems (DCF, DSS, DHMAS, and Education).
6. Identify and implement effective public education strategies to combat homophobia and transphobia and promote acceptance of and support for LGBTQ youth and their families
7. Forge public and private partnerships that include the adult LGBT community to increase resources and foster support for the above recommendations

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Resources for more Information

- Homelessness Resource Center <<http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/LGBTQ-153.aspx>>: SAMHSA's LGBTQ youth homelessness online center with links to best practices, guides for service providers in areas of public health, safe zone creation, and shelter staff training.
- National Center for Homeless Education <http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/youth_so.php>: the resource page for LGBTQ youth research regarding how to prevent homelessness, working with school homeless liaisons, and working with those in foster care.
- National Alliance to End Homelessness <<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2239>>: the full solutions brief for service providers "National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth."
- National Coalition for the Homeless <<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/lgbtq.html>>: summary of policy issue, statistics, and resources (including videos) to train shelter staff and the public on the issue of LGBTQ Youth Homelessness
- The Obama Administration's It Gets Better Campaign <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/it-gets-better>>: the Administration's response to violence against LGBTQ youth, the Federal Strategic Plan on Youth Policy, and links for service providers to LGBTQ youth support services
- The Give a Damn Campaign <<http://www.wegiveadamn.org/issues/youth-homelessness/>>: LGBTQ advocacy organization's website, that speaks directly on the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness. Videos and links to nonprofit partner websites serving youth and advocacy materials.
- National Center for Excellence, LGBTQ Youth Homelessness <<http://www.center4si.com/projects/projects.cfm?project=220735c4-a78b-422f-b7e5-6f34880ff9f3>>: A project of the Center for Social Innovation focused on training service providers and advocates on the needs of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, including program highlights, best practices, and training materials and information.
- The National Alliance to End Homelessness <<http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/issues/youth>> has a National Advisory Council to address LGBTQ homeless youth issues, with subcommittees focused on best practices, appropriations, and transgendered youth.
- A Mayoral Commission in New York City put together a comprehensive report on the needs of LGBTQ youth in New York and the strategies available to meet these needs. The report, All Our Children: Strategies to Prevent Homelessness, Strengthen Services, and Build Support for LGBTQ Youth <http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/2010/pr267_10_report.pdf>, details a ten point plan to improve outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

