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January 2011



# Addressing the Urgent Needs of DC Area LGBTQ Youth

Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League **SMYAL**

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**In the fall of 2010,** the nation was shocked and saddened by a string of news reports about teenagers taking their own lives after enduring anti-gay bullying and harassment from their peers. Seeing these young lives end so tragically brought home the challenges that so many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth face every day and showed us all how far we have to go to make our communities safe—and how high the stakes are. And yet, in the face of this heartbreaking loss, many of the responses we've seen give reason for renewed hope: parents, teachers, government leaders, community members and youth advocates have all raised their voices across the country to support LGBTQ youth and end the heterosexism and homophobia that do so much harm.

This national call to action echoes the course of events that led to SMYAL's founding in 1984, when a group of local activists came together to call for change after a group of young men were incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's Psychiatric Hospital for failing to measure up to the cultural expectation of masculinity. In those early meetings of the SMYAL founders, a handful of committed community members set out an ambitious vision to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and make the DC metro area safer for the generations of youth that would follow.

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**Many LGBTQ youth continue to face rejection, isolation, and hopelessness... and we are reminded that so much more needs to be done.**

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More than a quarter-century later, SMYAL has changed the lives of countless youth through supportive programming at our youth center and by raising awareness of LGBTQ youth issues throughout the region. In that time, we've seen marked changes in our community and our youth: youth are coming out younger and younger, and, more than ever, many parents, community organizations, social workers, and religious groups are learning to welcome and accept them. Gay-Straight Alliances are more common in our local schools and openly gay celebrities and politicians are more common on our television sets. The world for LGBTQ youth in the DC metro area has undeniably changed. At the same time, many LGBTQ youth, including some of

our community's most vulnerable, continue to face rejection, isolation, and hopelessness as they struggle through their adolescence, and we are reminded that so much more needs to be done.

At SMYAL, we are committed to supporting our LGBTQ youth today while also laying the groundwork to make tomorrow safer for all youth. To ensure that we are focusing our programs and efforts on meeting the most pressing needs, over the past year, we have conducted a thorough LGBTQ youth needs assessment. To do so, we've facilitated focus group discussions with our local youth and analyzed cutting edge research from across the country. In this report, you will find the results of that assessment, and recommendations for how we can all work together to support our community's LGBTQ youth.

We know there is much work to do, and we know the stakes are high. Together, we can remove the barriers LGBTQ youth face, and make the DC metro area a place where all youth are valued and empowered.

Sincerely,

Andrew Barnett,  
Executive Director

# ★ Executive Summary

**T**hrough serving local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth for more than 25 years, the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL) has seen the needs of the local youth population change and evolve over time, just as the entire DC area has. Today, the local landscape for LGBTQ youth seems to be one of both tremendous opportunity and dire need. The LGBT community has made significant progress in securing additional legal recognitions and protections and increasing visibility and awareness of LGBT issues. At the same time, the economic downturn has reduced the availability of jobs while driving up demand for social services, leaving many families and youth without ready access to key needs such as food and housing. LGBTQ youth now live in a world where there are numerous LGBTQ student clubs in local schools and also numerous homeless LGBTQ youth living on the streets.

This climate has an enormous impact on the lives of LGBTQ youth growing up in the DC area today, and also in the services and supports they need to grow into happy, healthy, and economically stable adults. In order to understand the urgent and long-term needs of LGBTQ youth and the complexity of their

experiences, SMYAL undertook a comprehensive needs assessment in 2010. This assessment included a review of the available data on local LGBTQ youth, and also information from focus groups with members of the local youth population.

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**LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience bullying and violence; engage in unsafe sexual behavior; abuse alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs; experience homelessness; and attempt suicide.**

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Reviewed independently, the available research and information gathered in SMYAL's focus groups seems, at first glance, to paint two different pictures. Research studies reveal a plethora of risk factors and needs: LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience bullying and violence; engage in unsafe sexual



behavior; abuse alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs; experience homelessness; and attempt suicide. In contrast, conversations among LGBTQ youth in SMYAL's focus groups did not center on the disparities between LGBTQ and heterosexual youth in the local community, but instead focused on the overwhelming economic need facing so many DC area youth, including access to housing, jobs, and other commodities.

Analyzing both the available research and focus group reports together reveals a more complex intersection of needs: although youth may not perceive being LGBTQ as a primary barrier, research shows that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for a host of negative health outcomes, such as depression and substance abuse. DC-area LGBTQ youth encounter the same challenges facing all youth in their communities, but their experiences as LGBTQ youth are not the same as those of their heterosexual peers. All DC public school students enter into a system with the highest dropout rate in the country, but LGBTQ youth are far more likely to report missing school because they feel unsafe. In many cases, exploring the experiences of LGBTQ youth reveals additional challenges because of their LGBTQ status and additional barriers in accessing key safety net supports such as housing and job training.

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## **LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for a host of negative health outcomes, such as depression and substance abuse.**

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This report highlights those experiences and examines the ways in which socioeconomic inequality, institutionalized racism, and anti-LGBTQ discrimination intersect in the lives of local LGBTQ youth. The following summary of recommendations are based on those needs and outline ways in which community providers, advocates, LGBTQ and ally youth, and government officials must work together to address the challenges facing LGBTQ youth in the DC metro area and ensure that these young people have access to the services they need.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

**1** Build local capacity to serve LGBTQ youth who are homeless by expanding culturally competent emergency shelters, transitional housing programs and homelessness prevention services for LGBTQ youth.

**2** Educate schools and community service providers about LGBTQ youth populations to ensure schools and community spaces are safe and affirming for LGBTQ youth.

**3** LGBTQ youth have multiple identities, and programs must be built to speak to the intersection of these identities and reflect the multiculturalism of the local LGBTQ youth population.

**4** HIV/AIDS prevention education, testing services, and care for youth living with HIV/AIDS must be expanded in the suburbs and the District and include culturally competent and relevant information for LGBTQ youth populations.

**5** Dedicated supportive programming for LGBTQ youth must be expanded in the DC metro area, including increasing the variety of programs offered and programs targeting underserved sub-populations.

**6** Community organizations must incorporate popular technology and communications such as text messages and social networking to outreach to LGBTQ youth populations and must ensure communication channels are operated with clear protocols to ensure safety.

**7** Local capacity for services and programs for parents and guardians of LGBTQ youth must be increased, and programs serving LGBTQ youth should involve parents and guardians in their work.

**8** The needs of local LGBTQ youth are ever-changing, and so community organizations and stakeholders must continually assess youth needs and empower youth as leaders in program development.

A young man in a grey shirt and pink tie is presenting a certificate to a young woman at a podium. The woman is wearing glasses and a grey sweater, and she is smiling broadly. The background is a red curtain.

**SMYAL works to educate the broader community about the challenges facing LGBTQ youth and raise awareness of the need for safe spaces for this population.**

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**SMYAL's Mission and History** The Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL) is the only Washington, DC, metro area service organization dedicated solely to supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Founded in 1984, SMYAL is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. SMYAL's mission is to promote and support self-confident, healthy, productive lives for LGBTQ youth ages 13–21 as they journey from adolescence into adulthood.

To fulfill its mission, SMYAL concentrates its work in five areas:

1. Life Skills and Leadership Development;
2. Counseling and Support;
3. Health and Wellness Education;
4. Safe Social Activities; and
5. Community Outreach and Education.

Since its beginnings over 25 years ago, SMYAL has reached more than 10,000 youth through direct programming and provided training and outreach to over 5,000 youth workers and community members.

**SMYAL Today** Each year, SMYAL provides structured after-school programming to more than 350 LGBTQ youth through weekly programs and special events. Most SMYAL participants are 16 to 19 years old, more than 95 percent are African American, and many come from low-income families. Many of the youth SMYAL serves live in foster homes, group houses, and kinship placements, which makes identifying the jurisdiction of residence difficult; however, most of the youth SMYAL serves live in Wards 7 and 8 in the District of Columbia and Prince George's County in Maryland. Youth living in Virginia and other parts of Maryland and the District also regularly access SMYAL's programs.

In addition to offering direct service programming, SMYAL works to educate the broader community about the challenges facing LGBTQ youth and raise awareness of the need for safe spaces for this population. Through its community education program, SMYAL provides LGBTQ cultural competency training to more than 400 youth service providers each year, including social workers, police officers, court officials, community service providers, and teachers. SMYAL staff and youth leaders also work to promote positive social change for

local youth through advocacy and training workshops. Each year SMYAL provides youth awareness and ally training to more than 300 local youth in schools and through other community service providers.

SMYAL employs a staff of 11, operates with an annual budget just under \$1 million, and is funded through public grants, private foundations, corporate support, and individual donations. SMYAL receives federal funding for HIV prevention and services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and through the Children's National Medical Center.

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**SMYAL's mission is to promote and support self-confident, healthy, productive lives for LGBTQ youth ages 13–21 as they journey from adolescence into adulthood.**

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**SMYAL Programs** SMYAL provides comprehensive services and educational outreach at an onsite youth center in Capitol Hill and throughout the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The organization empowers LGBTQ youth to overcome the many challenges they face through high-impact programming, and by providing a safe and supportive space in which to grow and learn. Programming consists of the following:

- **Youth Leadership Development:** SMYAL promotes positive youth leadership development through these curriculum-based programs:
  - *Youth Advocates Program:* This intensive year-long program empowers youth to advocate for positive social change while building skills and increasing knowledge of LGBTQ issues.
  - *Women's Leadership Institute:* This multi-faceted program provides young women an investigation of women's issues and promotes community service through four weeklong summits, a weekend retreat, and monthly after-school meetings.
- **HIV Prevention and Services:** SMYAL promotes healthy behavior choices through these initiatives:



- *Brotherhood University (BU)*: SMYAL employs the proven-effective “Many Men, Many Voices” curriculum through weekend retreats for young gay and bisexual men of color.
- *HIV Counseling, Testing, and Referral (CTR)*: Certified professionals provide free and confidential HIV CTR at SMYAL’s Youth Center and at local venues through partnerships with other community-based organizations and businesses.
- *Care Advocacy*: Through a partnership with Children’s National Medical Center, SMYAL connects all HIV-positive youth to wraparound services and provides ongoing support.
- **Weekly After-School Programs**: SMYAL staff members and volunteers facilitate an array of structured out-of-school time (OST) programs every weekday at its Capitol Hill Youth Center, including weekly support groups facilitated by clinical staff; youth arts programming to promote self-expression; discussion groups with guest speakers from the community; and recreational nights with safe social activities.
- **Community Education and Provider Trainings**: SMYAL provides LGBTQ youth cultural competency training to

youth service providers and local youth throughout the community, including the following program:

- *Mental Health Initiative*: SMYAL provides ongoing technical assistance and clinical supervision for social workers with LGBTQ youth clients in individual counseling at local community-based core service agencies.

## Assessing the Current Needs of LGBTQ Youth

In 2009, SMYAL celebrated its 25th anniversary of providing services to metro DC-area lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. While this milestone served as an important marker of the organization’s history and stability, the anniversary also highlighted the dramatic changes the LGBT community has experienced in the last quarter-century on both the national and local levels:

- LGBTQ youth are growing up in a more tolerant climate than previous generations. Public opinion is more accepting of LGBT individuals, and the growing number of school Gay-Straight Alliances signals LGBTQ youth are increasingly accepted by their peers. LGBTQ youth today are also more likely than previous generations to grow up seeing openly LGBT individuals in their communities, in elected office, and in the media.

- The legislative climate has also changed. The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009 expanded federal hate-crime law to include crimes motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity. Washington, DC prohibits job discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Rights for same-sex couples have also progressed, and the District is one of the few places in the United States where same-sex couples can legally marry.
- At the same time, violence and harassment against LGBT individuals persists. Sexual orientation hate crimes are the most prevalent of all reported hate crimes in Washington, DC; in 2008, more than 70 percent of reported hate crimes were motivated by sexual orientation bias. LGBTQ youth are at higher risk to be harassed, suffer depression, or attempt suicide than their non-LGBTQ classmates.
- Technology has transformed how individuals communicate, and youth are among the first to adopt these new technologies. Mobile phones, texting, the Internet, and social media have changed how individuals internalize, organize, and respond to information. For LGBTQ youth these technologies also present new ways to find information and connect with each other—as well as raise concerns about security and safety, including the issue of cyber-bullying.
- AIDS is no longer perceived to be an illness exclusive to gay men, but the disease continues to affect the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the United States and the world.

SMYAL has also changed, growing from a weekend support group into a vibrant Capitol Hill youth center and well-respected local community-based provider. In the first decade of the 21st century, SMYAL has seen shifts in its programs in response to the needs of the community it serves and the opportunities available. In 2001, SMYAL received its first federal grant for HIV prevention and services, and since then has implemented a sophisticated HIV prevention initiative incorporating a proven-effective intervention, free and confidential counseling and testing, and limited case management for HIV-positive youth. SMYAL has also seen a demographic shift in the organization's youth population, trending toward African American young men ages 16–19, and especially youth from Wards 7 and 8 in Washington, DC.

In order to assess the effect of these trends on the metro DC-area LGBTQ youth population and to determine how

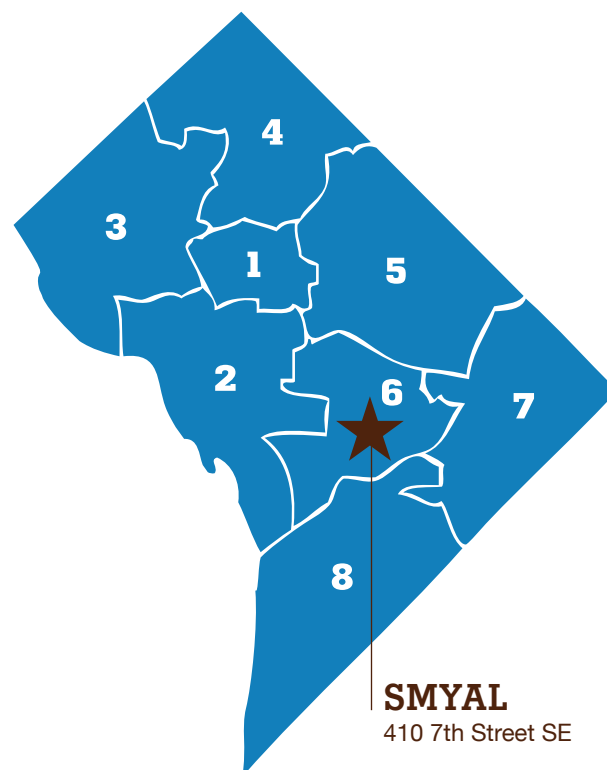
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## In 2008, more than 70 percent of reported hate crimes [in DC] were motivated by sexual orientation bias.

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to continue to improve and evolve its program offerings, SMYAL undertook an assessment of LGBTQ youths' current needs. As part of this project, the organization reviewed local health studies and student surveys, and the organization's Executive Director visited several other LGBTQ youth-serving organizations in the Northeast. SMYAL also held focus groups to learn more about the needs of LGBTQ youth.

This report details the findings of this process, which makes a compelling case for the continued need for targeted services addressing the challenges of local LGBTQ youth.



**N**o comprehensive single source of data exists about LGBTQ youth in the District of Columbia. However, an analysis of census data, health information, student surveys, and focus group discussions points to central issues and concerns affecting local LGBTQ youth. It should also be noted that several significant areas remain under-researched, such as the experiences of the District’s transgender and homeless LGBTQ youth.

**Population and Economics of the DC Metro Area** According to data from the United States Census Bureau, some 600,000 people call the District of Columbia home, 19 percent of whom are under age 18. More than half (55 percent) are African American. The number of black residents has been steadily declining; in 1990 African Americans made up 66 percent of the population. The white population has grown and now comprises 36 percent of the city, as opposed to 30 percent in 1990. Asians represent 3 percent and other races make up 6 percent. Nine percent of residents are Hispanic. More than 5.3 million people live in the larger Washington Metropolitan Area, which includes parts of Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. One quarter (25 percent) are under 18. More than half (58 percent) of the region’s residents are white, 25 percent are African American, 8 percent are Asian and 9 percent another race. Twelve percent of the region’s residents are Hispanic.

The District has one of the greatest gaps between high and low incomes in the United States. The median household income is just is \$57,900, but it is less than \$35,000 in the largely African American Wards 7 and 8. Wealth is concentrated among white households in the western ends of the District, where median income is \$106,000. One in three children in the District lives

<b>Population of District of Columbia</b>	1990 Census	2000 Census	2006–2008 ACS
Total population	606,900	572,059	588,373
Population under 18 years old	19%	20%	19%
<b>Race (all ages)</b>			
White	30%	32%	36%
African American	66%	61%	55%
Asian	2%	3%	3%
Other race	3%	5%	6%
Hispanic origin (of any race)	5%	8%	9%

*United States Census Bureau*

in poverty, including more than two in five African American children. Income differences sharpen when comparing the District to the larger Washington metropolitan area, where the median household income is more than \$85,000.

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**The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Washington, DC, public high school students found that 3 percent identified as lesbian or gay, 5 percent identified as bisexual and 3 percent were unsure of their sexual orientation.**

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**LGB Population** Using U.S. Census Bureau data, the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law estimates more than 8 percent of residents of the District of Columbia are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB)—the highest percentage of any state in the country. Nearly 33,000 LGB people live in the District, and there are approximately 4,000 same-sex couples. Twenty-six percent of same-sex couples are African American and 67 percent are white.

The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) of Washington, DC public high school students, a biannual study conducted at the state level by the Office for the State Superintendent for Education and nationwide by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that among youth, 3 percent identify as lesbian or gay, 5 percent identify as bisexual, and 3 percent are unsure of their sexual orientation.

Neither the Census Bureau nor the DC YRBS collected data about the transgender population in the DC metro area. Researchers estimate that 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population is transgender, and though anecdotal evidence suggests that the number may be higher in the DC metro area, local data collection about this population is severely lacking.

**HIV and AIDS** Three percent of District residents have HIV or AIDS—the highest figure in the nation—according to a 2009 report from the Washington, DC,

Department of Health. While rates of infection have increased among nearly every population and age group, African Americans are struck hardest: More than 75 percent of District residents who have contracted the virus are African American. Wards 6 and 8 have the highest percentages of residents living with the illness, with 3.3 and 3.4 percent, respectively.

A 2010 study by the Washington, DC, Department of Health found that 14 percent of gay men in the District are HIV positive. Forty percent of the study's participants reported being unaware of their HIV status, even though most had seen a doctor within the previous 12 months. Older gay men (ages 30 and higher) reported being tested less, using condoms less frequently, and having more sexual partners than younger men (ages 18 to 29), who generally reported having safer sex behaviors. However, despite the lower prevalence of HIV observed in the younger men in the survey, 100 percent of the young men who tested positive for HIV in the survey were men of color.

HIV and AIDS are also major concerns in the suburbs surrounding the District. Nearly half (46 percent) of people with AIDS in the Washington metropolitan area live in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, according to a report from the Washington AIDS Partnership. However, the report found that suburban HIV outreach is underfunded and lacks coordination, and in schools, HIV education varies widely and is rarely comprehensive. Condoms can eliminate or reduce the risk of spreading HIV during sex; however, just three schools in the District's suburbs provide live or video demonstrations for applying condoms, and two systems ban any condoms from being brought onto school grounds.

### **Experiences of Violence, Drug Use**

**and Suicide** A substantial number of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBQ) youth report being harassed or experiencing violence at school and at much higher rates than their non-LGBQ classmates, according to the YRBS study. (The survey does not ask about students' gender identity, and so data on transgender youth is not included.) Nearly half (47 percent) of LGBQ students report having property stolen or deliberately damaged, 37 percent report being bullied, and 23 percent report being threatened or injured with a weapon. Heterosexual-identified students report much lower rates of harassment and violence: 24 percent report having had belongings stolen or broken, 15 percent report being bullied, and 9 percent report being threatened. LGBQ young men in particular are at risk for violence: More than half (54 percent) of LGBQ males report having had property stolen, 51 percent report having been harassed,



**3%**

**of District residents have HIV or AIDS—  
the highest figure in the nation.**

and 38 percent report being threatened or injured with a weapon. More than one-quarter (28 percent) of LGBQ students said they have stayed home from school because they felt unsafe, compared to 12 percent of non-LGBQ students. LGBQ youth were also more likely to report experiencing dating violence and forced sexual intercourse (30 percent and 21 percent, respectively) than non-LGBQ youth (15 percent and 7 percent, respectively).

A similar pattern follows for drug use. More than one in four LGBQ students said they have used inhalants (30 percent), ecstasy (27 percent), or illegal steroids (26 percent); 24 percent report using methamphetamines; and 21 percent report using cocaine. Among non-LGBQ students, 7 percent report using inhalants, 5 percent report using ecstasy, 3 percent report using illegal steroids, 3 percent report having used methamphetamines, and 3 percent report having used cocaine.

LGBQ students were also more likely to report contemplating and attempting suicide. More than two in five (43 percent) LGBQ students said they have felt sad or hopeless, 29 percent report seriously considering suicide, 24 percent report having planned how they would commit suicide, and 38 percent report attempting suicide. Among non-LGBQ students, one-quarter (25 percent) report having felt hopeless, 13 percent report seriously considering suicide, 10 percent report having planned how they would commit suicide, and 8 percent report attempting suicide.

The YRBS does not directly address why LGBQ students are at higher risk to experience violence, drug use, or suicide, but research conducted by the Family Acceptance

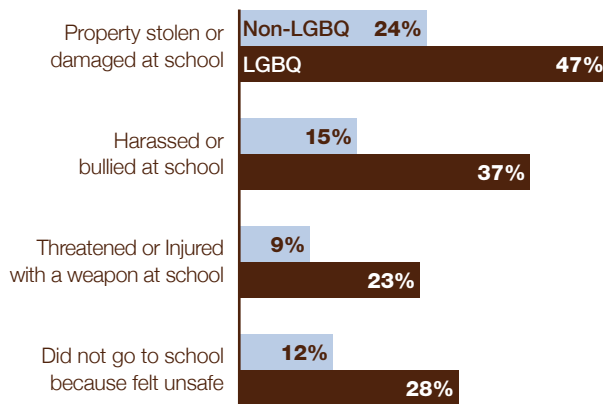
Project (FAP) at San Francisco State University points to the relationship between an LGBQ youth's sense of acceptance or rejection and his or her health. A study published in *Pediatrics* by FAP researchers in 2009 found that a family's rejection of a child's sexual orientation and/or gender expression was significantly associated with poorer health outcomes for the youth. In the study, researchers surveyed 224 LGBT young adults about nine key health indicators, including mental health, substance abuse, and sexual risk. Researchers found that the LGBT individuals who experienced higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex.

**Transgender Youth** While no Washington, DC, figures exist about transgender students, a national survey of middle and high school students reported by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2009 points to the specific needs and unique challenges faced by transgender youth. Transgender youth report many of the same risk factors experienced by their LGB peers:

- Almost all transgender students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (89 percent) and their gender expression (87 percent).
- More than half of transgender students reported being physically harassed in school because of their sexual orientation (55 percent) and their gender expression (53 percent).

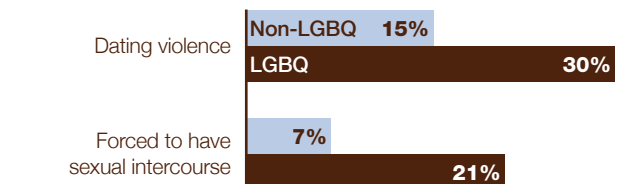
**Experiences of Violence Among Youth**

*2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Washington, DC public high school students*



**Experiences of Dating & Sexual Violence Among Youth**

*2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Washington, DC public high school students*



- More than one quarter of transgender students reported being physically assaulted in school because of their sexual orientation (28 percent) and their gender expression (26 percent).
- Almost half (46 percent) of transgender students reported skipping one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

**Homelessness** Local DC-area data on homeless LGBTQ youth is limited: the DC Youth Risk Behavior Survey only reaches youth attending school, and the unstable nature of many homeless youths’ lives prevents them from regularly attending school. However, a 2010 report released by the Center for American Progress (CAP) presents national data on homeless LGBTQ youth and demonstrates the incredible challenges this population faces. According to the CAP report, LGBTQ youth make up a disproportionate percentage of the national homeless youth population, in part due to the trend of LGBTQ youth “coming out” at earlier ages, when they depend on their families to meet their needs and are particularly vulnerable if they are rejected by their families. Homelessness has immediate consequences for LGBTQ youth, including placing them at risk for attempting suicide and engaging in survival sex—the trading of sex for food, shelter, or other materials. Long-term consequences include reducing the youth’s long-term economic trajectory. Additionally, the CAP report highlights the dearth of programs and protections for LGBTQ youth who are homeless, including limited federal assistance for housing programs for youth

and a lack of regulations ensuring providers are culturally competent to serve LGBTQ youth.

### SMYAL Focus Groups of LGBTQ Youth

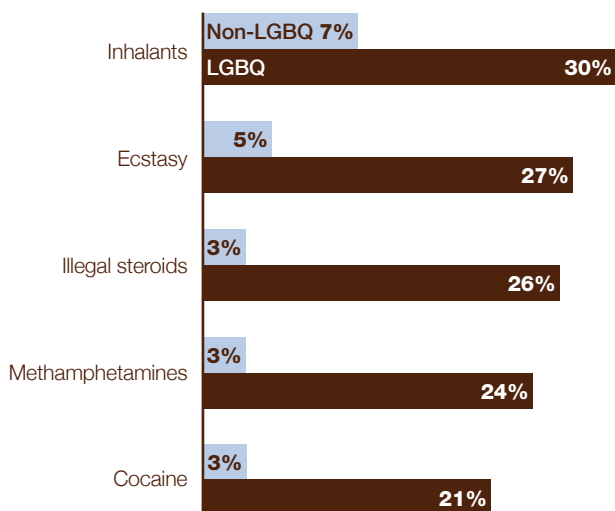
SMYAL conducted focus groups in 2005 and 2010 to learn more about the lives and experiences of Washington, DC-area LGBTQ youth. The results of the 2005 focus groups are reported in the publication *Confronting the Crisis: Issues Facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth, Especially LGBTQ Youth of Color, in the District*. In *Confronting the Crisis*, SMYAL highlights the tremendous need among LGBTQ youth for the following:

- Safe and affirming schools and communities;
- Dedicated shelters and housing;
- Safe out-of-school time, especially for transgender youth;
- Job and life skills, especially for transgender youth;
- Increased funding for expert mental health counseling;
- Substance abuse and HIV prevention and treatment services; and
- Culturally competent services for LGBTQ Latino/a youth.

In 2010, SMYAL conducted another series of focus groups of LGBTQ youth to learn how they feel about services currently being offered, and how they would like to see those services enhanced. A total of 39 LGBTQ youth participated in five focus groups. Youth were recruited from SMYAL programs, through the social networks of SMYAL

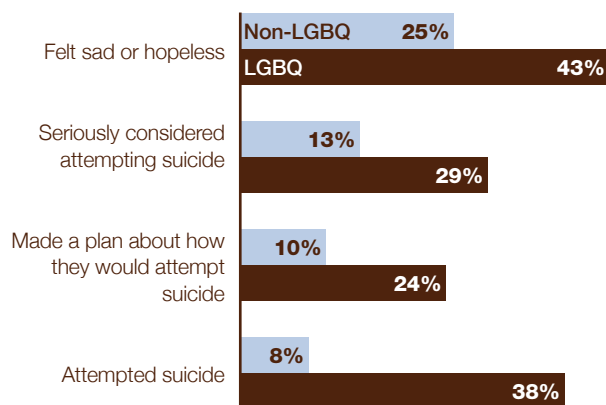
### Drug Use Among Youth

2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Washington, DC public high school students



### Suicide-Related Behaviors Among Youth

2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Washington, DC public high school students



youth, and through other community service providers. The findings of these focus groups are as follows:

**Community Resources** Group participants received services through a variety of outlets, including many local community-based organizations. Youth had participated in almost all of SMYAL’s program offerings, including discussion groups, structured programs, and interventions, as well as social programs such as dances and movie nights. Youth also reported receiving services through a variety of other community-based organizations, including those providing emergency shelter and transitional housing, HIV prevention and service organizations, local community health centers, community centers, programs focusing on the Latino/a population, and programs that provide services to individuals engaged in commercial sex work. Youth had also participated in groups in their high schools and colleges such as Gay-Straight Alliances and LGBTQ student affinity groups.

**Economic Needs and Housing** Economic needs were paramount among the concerns of youth. Focus group participants repeatedly said they felt unsafe and experienced difficulty finding jobs, finding transportation to and from services, and gaining access to healthcare. Participants also repeatedly stressed the need for housing resources and the importance of securing housing above other services. The prevalence of homelessness in participants’ peer networks was frequently referenced. Additionally, participants reported that many of these needs are critical for all youth and some participants felt were exacerbated for LGBTQ youth, due to anti-LGBTQ discrimination and the lack of safe spaces for LGBTQ youth.

**Safe Spaces for Out-of-School Time** Focus group participants reported the need for safe spaces and drop-in centers for LGBTQ youth out of school time, including the need for access to computers and the internet, space to do homework, and a space to socialize with their peers. “Coming out” issues were rarely brought up, but some youth participants did report the need for general life guidance and mentoring. Although youth participants described existing programs as generally fun and engaging, they reported a greater need for more variety in programs and messages, including opportunities outside the District.

**Needs of Transgender Youth** Transgender youth had a number of specific needs, including more knowledge about hormones and gender reassignment surgery, as well as

the need for transgender-friendly subsidized housing and shelters. Focus group respondents reported familiarity with the emergency shelters and transitional living programs for youth in the city, but indicated they were difficult and confusing for transgender youth to navigate. Through the focus groups, transgender youth also reported the need for a space to discuss issues specific to their community and experiences, such as strategies for finding healthy relationships and the prevalence of trading sex for money, goods, or services.

**HIV and STD Prevention** Focus group participants discussed the need for HIV and STD prevention education for all youth, not just LGBTQ youth. Moreover, the lesbian and bisexual women focus group participants felt neglected with respect to sex education, both in schools and in community-based organizations geared towards women and sexual minorities, reporting that the majority of sex education is focused on HIV prevention and condom use for gay and straight men. These participants also reported a lack of safe spaces for discussion about lesbian sexuality for young women.

**Cultural Diversity and Competency** Participants were conscious of diversity issues and indicated the need for programs that address racially and ethnically diverse groups of LGBTQ youth as well as a need for more programs for young women. Focus group participants indicated the need for programs and messages that address the needs of all LGBTQ youth, and reported a perception that existing programs focus too narrowly on young men. One African American youth who attended events at a Latino/a-focused organization said, “I was taught by my mom to be international and diverse ... I want to see what else is out there.”

**Impact of Technology** Focus group participants demonstrated a familiarity with and reliance on newer forms of technology to communicate, and an interest in programming utilizing these tools. Specifically, participants indicated using E-mail, text messaging, the Internet, and social media to learn about programs and services. Participants stated that paper brochures, fliers, and word-of-mouth were not as effective outreach tools as social media and other forms of technology. Additionally, youth reported using the Internet for finding sexual partners, and the need for education around safety in doing so.

**T**he recent research and 2010 SMYAL focus groups highlighted many challenges facing DC metro-area LGBTQ youth and several barriers impeding their ability to grow into healthy and productive adults. The data available on issues concerning local LGBTQ youth reveals a plethora of risk factors and needs: LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience bullying and violence; engage in unsafe sexual behavior; abuse alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs; experience homelessness; and attempt suicide. In addition, LGBTQ youth in SMYAL's focus groups voiced a more succinct understanding of local youth needs: the need for access to economic resources.

For focus group participants, economic needs were paramount above all others. Discussions focused on tangible commodities and services, such as housing and job training, and spoke little about other LGBTQ challenges such as “coming out.” Although many participants reported accessing programs at SMYAL and other youth service agencies, including those focused on addressing intangible issues such as self-esteem and youth development, they also identified a clear and unmet need for help in achieving ongoing economic stability.

Many of the participants experienced the challenges facing all youth in their communities throughout the DC metro area, including underperforming schools, poverty, and the remnants of institutionalized racism. Many of the participants also saw their primary economic needs as separate and distinct from their issues as LGBTQ youth. However, a deeper analysis of the research and focus group reports indicates that the economic challenges that LGBTQ youth participants experience are intensified by their LGBTQ status, making an already difficult path to adulthood seemingly impossible for so many of them.

**Housing and Homelessness** A central theme and economic need presented throughout the focus groups was access to housing and services for homeless youth. Participants described a wide range of causes of LGBTQ youth homelessness and the need for many levels of service to address the issue. Youth reported unstable living situations caused not only by disapproving and abusive families, but also by the lack of affordable housing in their communities, financially overwhelmed parents, or foster care and group home placements that are not LGBTQ affirming or welcoming. Regardless of the cause of homelessness, LGBTQ youth experienced additional challenges in finding stable housing due to their LGBTQ status.

In the DC metro area, only one facility provides dedicated transitional living beds for LGBTQ youth, and there are no dedicated emergency beds for this population. Most homeless LGBTQ youth who access services do so through facilities serving the general youth, or, in cases of youth over 18, adult populations. Furthermore, focus group participants reported that negotiating the systems to obtain a placement is often confusing, and beds in housing programs in DC are often full, giving all homeless youth few options.

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**Youth who are transgender are often housed according to their biological sex despite their gender expression, forcing them to either hide their gender identity or open themselves to abuse and violence from other youth living in their facility.**

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When LGBTQ youth do obtain placement in these facilities, they often experience harassment, discrimination, and even violence from other youth and also report a lack of cultural competency from some agency staff members. Additionally, youth who are transgender are often housed according to their biological sex despite their gender expression, forcing them to either hide their gender identity or open themselves to abuse and violence from other youth living in their facility.

Facing the possibility of abuse and torment, LGBTQ youth who are homeless may choose not to access these services, and instead continue to live in unstable and unsafe conditions, including “couch surfing,” sleeping in public spaces such as parks, or remaining in abusive home environments. Moreover, by not accessing youth housing programs, these LGBTQ youth are also not being connected to other services necessary to stabilize them and ensure their future success, such as individual counseling and job training.

**Education and Job Training** Focus group participants pointed to education and job training as other major economic needs. As with housing, although participants did not identify homophobia or transphobia

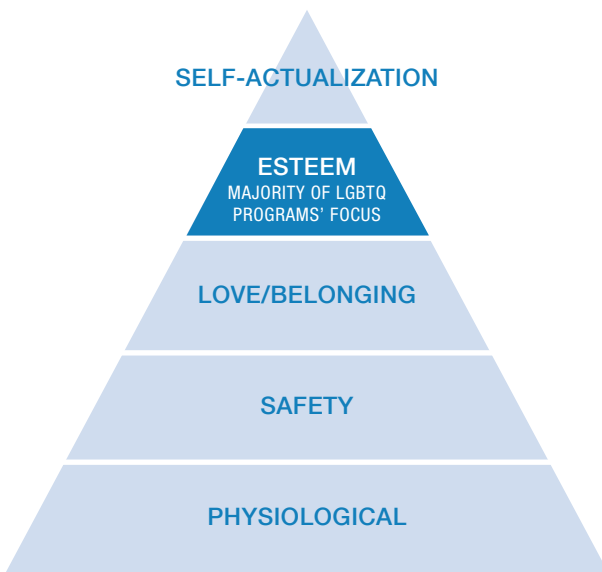
as the primary barrier to employment, research shows a connection between this economic need and the experiences of LGBTQ youth in the DC area.

LGBTQ youth looking for employment in the DC metro area are entering into a highly educated, highly skilled job market, where education and work experience are important factors for gainful employment. However, available data about the experience of LGBTQ youth in DC schools shows that they are at significantly greater risk for experiencing bullying, assault, and missing school because they feel unsafe there. Although dropout rates are significant for all DC public school students, the prevalence of verbal and physical abuse that LGBTQ youth report in schools shows that they face additional obstacles to completing their high school education successfully and earning their diplomas.

The growing number of LGBTQ student groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances in local schools and actions such as the Washington, DC, school chancellor's participation in the District's gay pride parade signal a growing understanding that LGBTQ youth are members of the school community, which is a positive development. However, research shows that the acknowledgement of LGBTQ youth in local schools has not eliminated the harassment and violence they often face in these institutions.

Many LGBTQ youth accessing SMYAL's services do not complete high school in a traditional public school, and instead have earned or are working toward a GED. When LGBTQ youth drop out of school, they also lose access to support services available in school such as programs

**Hierarchy of Needs**



that promote job readiness and training. And so, although LGBTQ youth join many other DC-area youth in needing job skills and employment, the challenges they face in attending schools shown to be unsafe and unwelcoming for LGBTQ youth creates an additional burden and reduces their employability in the long-term.

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**Available data about the experience of LGBTQ youth in DC schools shows that they are at significantly greater risk for experiencing bullying, assault, and missing school because they feel unsafe there.**

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**Economic Stability and Youth Leadership Development**

Both focus group discussions and available research demonstrate that LGBTQ youth in the DC area have urgent economic needs necessary for stabilizing their lives and improving their ability to grow into productive community members as adults. However, when looking at a traditional hierarchy of needs, many existing community programs for LGBTQ youth focus on meeting needs in the upper tiers: programs aim to foster a sense of belonging and contribute to high self-esteem. But to reach these goals, youth must first have the lower tiers of physical needs and personal safety met.

Without access to stable housing, education resources, and job training, LGBTQ youth are not likely to achieve the long-term outcomes and personal successes that many youth development programs strive towards. Conversely, LGBTQ youth report—both through focus groups and research studies—that they are more likely to experience harassment, abuse, and intolerance than heterosexual youth when attempting to access community services available for youth in the DC area, including key support mechanisms like emergency shelters and public schools. In order to meet this urgent need, youth service providers and LGBTQ youth advocates should focus on building the capacity of organizations that serve youth by ensuring that local schools and services are culturally competent to serve LGBTQ youth and that adequate protections are enforced to ensure their safety. In addition, LGBTQ youth advocates should focus

on utilizing local expertise to provide specialized services for LGBTQ youth, including housing and job training.

### **Intersection of Multiple Identities for**

**LGBTQ Youth** Just as economic status intersects with LGBTQ identity in the local youth population, so do race, ethnicity, geography, and gender. Youth do not interact with the world from a strict LGBTQ identity, and their challenges are not uniquely LGBTQ. In order to meet the needs of local youth who are LGBTQ, service organizations must adopt a framework that addresses the impact of racism, sexism, and classism, as these are all realities that LGBTQ youth experience simultaneous to heterosexism and anti-LGBTQ bias.

Furthermore, LGBTQ youth in focus groups voiced a strong need for multiculturalism and programs that target the many groups that make up the local LGBTQ youth community. Young gay and bisexual African American men indicated they saw too narrow a focus in many existing programs, especially those focused on HIV prevention, and expressed an interest in programs that also bring in the experience of other cultures, such as Latino communities. Young women participants spoke about the lack of adequate services for women, including sexual health education for lesbians, even as they were inundated with HIV prevention messaging targeted at young men.

LGBTQ youth are members of all of the many diverse communities living in the DC metro area. In order to meet their needs and support positive youth development, programs for LGBTQ youth must be culturally competent to serve youth also along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender, and must focus on the plethora of needs facing specific populations in developing programs.

For an LGBTQ youth-serving organization not to work at this intersection of identities is to risk leaving out those who are most in need. This rule also holds true for organizations that serve the general population.

# 53%

**of transgender students reported being physically harassed in school because of their gender expression.**



# ★ Recommendations

**A**fter analyzing the information gathered through focus groups and reviewing available research, SMYAL has identified several major areas of need. The following recommendations are based on those needs and outline steps community providers and advocates should take to address the challenges facing LGBTQ youth in the DC metro area and improve services for this population. SMYAL will use these recommendations to improve its own program services and to prioritize issue areas for advocacy and community education.

## **1** Build local capacity to serve LGBTQ youth who are homeless by expanding culturally competent emergency shelters, transitional housing programs and homelessness prevention services for LGBTQ youth.

There is an urgent need for increasing local capacity to serve homeless LGBTQ youth through both ongoing cultural competency training for regional housing providers and specialized programs tailored to the unique needs of this population. Issues of homelessness and access to affordable housing continue to affect LGBTQ youth disproportionately, and without having this primary need met, homeless youth who are LGBTQ are at greater risk for many negative health behaviors and outcomes. In the DC metro area, only one facility provides dedicated transitional living beds for LGBTQ youth, and there are no dedicated emergency beds for this population. Homeless LGBTQ youth in DC often utilize shelters and housing resources for the general youth population, where they report experiencing discrimination, harassment, and a lack of cultural competency. Moreover, youth housing programs are consistently full, and many LGBTQ youth are unable to find placements even in the shelters serving the broader youth population.

## **2** Educate schools and community service providers about LGBTQ youth populations to ensure schools and community spaces are safe and affirming for LGBTQ youth.

Whether at school or interacting with city social services, the majority of LGBTQ youths' experiences are with groups and institutions that are unprepared for or unequipped to serve them. Schools, where LGBTQ youth are dramatically more likely to experience violence than their classmates, are especially in

need of training and education so that LGBTQ students can have the same learning opportunities as others. Transgender youth are at high risk to suffer violence, and both schools and service institutions need adequate training to serve them competently. Additionally, community organizations that provide essential services to youth must also ensure that staff members are culturally competent and that their programs are safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth, who are often among those in greatest need.

## **3** LGBTQ youth have multiple identities, and programs must be built to speak to the intersection of these identities and reflect the multiculturalism of the local LGBTQ youth population.

The needs of LGBTQ youth are shaped by the complex intersection of sexual, gender, racial and ethnic identities, as well as by the economics of living in Washington, DC where two in five African American children live in poverty. Many of the most urgent needs for LGBTQ youth are economic ones, such as housing and jobs, but few LGBTQ youth programs focus on economic concerns, and few Washington, DC resources for housing or jobs specifically reach out to LGBTQ youth. Effective LGBTQ youth services must address all of youths' identities, not just one. LGBTQ youth programs must build services that are culturally competent to work with diverse populations, foster youth spaces that celebrate multiculturalism, and ensure outreach to the populations that are most underserved regionally.

## **4** HIV/AIDS prevention education, testing services, and care for youth living with HIV/AIDS must be expanded in the suburbs and the District, and include culturally competent and relevant information for LGBTQ youth populations.

There is a critical need for HIV education and prevention in the suburbs surrounding Washington, DC and in the District. Nearly half of people with AIDS in the Washington metropolitan area live in the suburbs, but HIV education there varies widely and is rarely comprehensive. In the District, young gay and bisexual men continue to report infection rates that far exceed the general population, and the majority of youth who are diagnosed with HIV are youth of color. However, service providers should include all

affected populations in HIV/AIDS education, and avoid redundancy and program fatigue by incorporating diverse understandings and experiences of the disease into prevention education. There is a continued need for specialized education for young men who are gay and bisexual, and young lesbian and bisexual women also need HIV prevention and sexual health education.

**5 Dedicated supportive programming for LGBTQ youth must be expanded in the DC metro area, including increasing the variety of programs offered and programs targeting underserved sub-populations.**

LGBTQ youth in focus groups wanted more variety in programming—especially for opportunities outside the District. Organizations should develop initiatives that address both basic skills (such as help with homework and job training) as well as advanced skills (such as leadership development). Successful initiatives can grow into new ongoing programs. New initiatives should take aim at segments of youth who typically are left out of LGBTQ programs, such as young women, youth under 16, and Latinos/as.

**6 Community organizations must incorporate new technology and communication such as text messages and social networking to outreach to LGBTQ youth populations, and must ensure communication channels are operated with clear protocols to ensure safety.**

Service organizations should take advantage of new technology and focus on promoting services through new methods of word-of-mouth advertising such as social media and text messaging. Successful communications are two-way: promotional flyers are likely to be thrown away, but asking Facebook fans, “What are you wearing to the dance?” is a surer strategy to draw attention to an event. Potential communications practices include regularly hosting open houses, posting videos from events on a YouTube channel, and promoting HIV testing via text message (with a note encouraging youth to forward it to their friends). Organizations should include content on their website tailored for their youth population that makes use of two-way communication and includes frequently updated content. At the same time, organizations need to be cognizant of security and safety concerns, especially when it comes to youth safely meeting each other and preventing cyber-bullying. All online presences on social

networking sites should be monitored by the organization, and should have clearly posted rules prohibiting cyber-bullying and other electronic abuse.

**7 Local capacity for services and programs for parents and guardians of LGBTQ youth must be increased, and programs serving LGBTQ youth should involve parents and guardians in their work.**

The research of the Family Acceptance Project clearly shows that when parents engage in accepting and supportive behavior, their LGBTQ child is less likely to participate in risky behavior and has improved health outcomes. Many programs serving LGBTQ youth do not incorporate parents in their work, and few programs and supports exist in the DC metro area for these parents. FAP is developing tools and curricula for parents of LGBTQ youth, and as these become available, local community providers must utilize them to support both parents and their LGBTQ children. Additionally, LGBTQ youth-serving organizations should include and partner with supportive parents and parent serving organizations when possible, as parents have strong potential as volunteers, board members, and advocates for all LGBTQ youth.

**8 The needs of local LGBTQ youth are ever-changing, and so community organizations and stakeholders must continually assess youth needs and empower youth as leaders in program development.**

The needs of LGBTQ youth in the DC metro area continue to be impacted by the larger changes in our community. Service organizations must make a constant effort to assess the needs of youth and stay in step as they grow, change interests, and follow new trends. Empowering youth participants as leaders in program design and drawing on their experiences and knowledge enables youth organizations to be more responsive and proactive in meeting youth needs, promotes positive youth leadership development for participants, and increases youth investment in the organization. Through informal processes such as offering a standing suggestion box, holding more organized listening campaigns, and developing youth advisory boards, the key to gathering feedback is sharing and responding to it and creating an exchange where youth play a significant role in shaping the organization and its services.



## **Empowering our community's LGBTQ youth, developing a new generation of leaders.**



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