

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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SMYAL Opens New Clinical Services Department to Expand Affirming and Accessible Mental Health Counseling for LGBTQ Youth

WASHINGTON, D.C.- Supporting and Mentoring Youth Advocates and Leaders (SMYAL) is building on their over 35 years of experience supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth this fall as they open a new Clinical Services Department that will provide free mental health counseling to LGBTQ youth ages 6-24 in Washington, D.C.

The SMYAL Clinical Services Department will be a unique program in the D.C. metro region that provides culturally competent and affirming support aimed at helping young people overcome trauma, stress, and other negative risk behaviors. SMYAL's Clinical Services Department will be housed out of their Eastern Market offices, complete with two private therapy rooms. The new program will be led by a licensed Director of Clinical Services who will oversee other clinicians as well as clinical interns, who are training to be the next generation of LGBTQ-affirming therapists. SMYAL hopes to serve around 50 youth each week, offering bilingual services to clients in individual talk therapy sessions and group sessions, as well as alternative therapies. Mental health services offered through this new program will be completely cost-free for every young person.

LGBTQ youth are overwhelmingly disproportionately at-risk for experiencing anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and homelessness, negative coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol use, or disengagement from school or social supports compared to their cis-straight peers. LGBTQ youths' mental health is also compounded by intersectional challenges based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as their race, socio-economic status, immigration status, gender expression, or other identities. The COVID-19 pandemic, hostile political debates targeting transgender youth, and racially motivated acts of violence over the past year and a half have greatly exacerbated these stressors. The [2021 Trevor Project Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) found that:

- 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and non-binary youth.
- 70% of LGBTQ youth stated that their mental health was "poor" most of the time or always during COVID-19.
- 48% of LGBTQ youth reported they wanted counseling from a mental health professional but were unable to receive it in the past year.

Mental and behavioral health counseling as well as the presence of caring adults in the lives of LGBTQ youth have been shown to greatly decrease rates of stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. However, identifying culturally competent providers who are both available as well as affordable is increasingly challenging as many affirming therapists do not have availability and a significant number do not accept insurance.

SMYAL Executive Director, Sultan Shakir, said, "This program helps deepen SMYAL's impact on the lives of LGBTQ youth by ensuring they have additional tools and resources that understand and affirm who they are, provide culturally competent care, and provide that care in a welcoming way."

Director of Clinical Services, Jorge Membreño, LICSW added, "The SMYAL Clinical Services Department will provide an affirming physical space so that the youth we serve can grow into the practice of loving themselves. Many of our queer and trans youth have felt isolated within their own thoughts, their families, and/or the world around them. We will walk with humility through their lives and help them heal."

SMYAL is proud to have been selected as the Long-Term Service Partner of the Kiwanis Club of Washington, D.C. which will provide \$100,000 a year for at least three years to support the Clinical Services Department. "The Kiwanis Club of Washington, D.C.'s commitment to providing programs and opportunities in support of children in the District is centered on meeting youth where they need us the most. We're incredibly excited to partner with SMYAL, strengthen our advocacy for LGBTQ youth, and save lives through our partnership," Kiwanis Club President, Steven McCarty, shared.

Additional funding will be provided by the Youth Services Department of the Department of Human Services as well as individual donations from SMYAL supporters.

To learn more about SMYAL's programs and services that empower LGBTQ youth, please visit [SMYAL.org](https://www.smyal.org).

SMYAL (Supporting and Mentoring Youth Advocates and Leaders) supports and empowers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. Through youth leadership, SMYAL creates opportunities for LGBTQ youth to build self-confidence, develop critical life skills, and engage their peers and community through service and advocacy. Committed to social change, SMYAL builds, sustains, and advocates for programs, policies, and services that LGBTQ youth need as they grow into adulthood.