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**Strengthening services for LGBTQ clients: Best practice recommendations for rural low-income service providers**

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Trans* or transgender (the T in LGBTQ) refers to a person’s gender identity rather than their sexual orientation. A person who identifies as trans* experiences and lives their life differently than the sex assigned to them at birth. This is a transgender woman may have been identified as male at birth, but identifies as female, lives her life as a woman, and should be referred to as she/her. This trans* woman may also identify as a sexual minority if she finds herself romantically and sexually interested in other women; alternatively, she may identify as straight. Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct identifiers.

While we use the acronym LGBTQ throughout this policy brief – because LGBTQ is the most commonly used and recognized acronym – we are really only speaking to the experiences of sexual minorities as represented in the RHSF data. This is not to say that trans* individuals do not also experience discrimination based on their gender identity or gender presentation. It is outside the scope of this particular policy brief, but service providers should take care to educate themselves about the experiences of trans* individuals in poverty as well.

More information can be found here: http://www.hrc.org/blog/enquiry/transgender-workers-at-greater-risk-for-unemployment-and-poverty

**Key Terms**

**Sexual orientation:** Also known as sexual identity, a person’s sexual orientation describes their romantic or sexual interest or attractions, which may be to someone of the same sex or a different sex. A person’s sexual orientation does not necessarily dictate sexual behavior and vice versa.

**Sexual Minority:** A term to describe people who identify as anything other than exclusively heterosexual. (i.e., LGBTQ individuals).

**LGBTQ:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer – this acronym is often used as an umbrella term to refer to all sexual minorities.

**Lesbian:** A woman who feels predominant romantic or sexual interest or attractions towards other women.

**Gay:** A man who feels predominant romantic or sexual interest or attractions towards other men.

**Bisexual:** A man or a woman who feels romantic or sexual interest or attractions towards both men and women.

**Transgender:** This refers to a person’s gender identity rather than sexual orientation, specifically a person whose gender identity is different than the sex assigned at birth.

**Queer:** Can be used as a derogatory term and some sexual minorities still find it offensive. However, the term queer has also been reclaimed by some sexual minorities, particularly younger generations, as a broader term to refer to a non-heterosexual orientation.

**Coming out:** Also known as coming out of the closet – refers to the act of disclosing a sexual minority status. Most sexual minorities describe coming out as an ongoing process, as new relationships and interactions require.

**Heteronormative:** A belief system that implies that heterosexuality is the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ sexual orientation and sees any sexual minority identity as a deviation from that.

**Homophobia:** A term used to describe the fear, hatred, and/or discrimination of LGBTQ people, or people perceived to be sexual minorities.

**Legal v. social family:** For most governmental and policy purposes, family is LEGALLY defined as people who live together and are related by blood, marriage, or adoption. However, with many of these legal relationships denied to LGBTQ people, a SOCIAL family may form through commitment ceremonies or stepparent relationships. THIS IS STILL FAMILY!

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**Summary**

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBTQ) are more likely to be poor than heterosexual people. While they face the same general risk factors for poverty as others, LGBTQ people may experience additional discrimination in hiring, employment, and compensation, as well as face rejection from friends and family members who potentially could provide financial support in times of need. For LGBTQ people who live outside of large cities, the risk for poverty is even greater. Thus, it is important that low-income service providers in rural communities provide culturally competent services to sexual minorities and their families.

The purpose of this brief is to describe the experiences of LGBTQ people with financial difficulties living in rural America and to provide recommendations for best practices. Our goal is to provide resources to help you strengthen your current efforts to welcome and serve sexual minority clients.

**STRENGTHENING SERVICES FOR LGBTQ CLIENTS:**

**Best Practice Recommendations for Rural Low-Income Service Providers**

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**Myths & Facts**

- **Myth:** Sexual minorities live mostly in urban communities. No one in my rural community is gay.
  - **Fact:** Individuals in your town may identify as LGBTQ even if there is not a visible gay community.

- **Myth:** Sexual minorities are affluent. With two incomes and no kids to raise, they are actually better off financially than straight people.
  - **Fact:** Despite the images shown in the media, LGBTQ people do experience poverty, and actually face more financial barriers than heterosexual people.

- **Myth:** Sexual minorities are easy to spot because they are in a relationship with someone of the same sex. If you aren't in a same-sex relationship, you aren't really LGBTQ.
  - **Fact:** People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer are more likely to be poor than heterosexual people. While they face the same general risk factors for poverty as others, LGBTQ people may experience additional discrimination in hiring, employment, and compensation, as well as face rejection from friends and family members who potentially could provide financial support in times of need. For LGBTQ people who live outside of large cities, the risk for poverty is even greater. Thus, it is important that low-income service providers in rural communities provide culturally competent services to sexual minorities and their families.

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**FEEL FREE TO COPY AND DISTRIBUTE THIS BRIEF FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.**
Lucy is a 21-year-old, single mother living in the rural Midwest. She identifies as a lesbian, and has a 2-year-old daughter. Ashlynn. Lucy lives with her grandmother who helps care for Ashlynn and provides financial support. This situation can be difficult though, since the support Lucy’s family provides is conditional. They have accepted her being a young, single mother, and have helped to provide financial support, but they do not accept her lesbian identity.

With nearly all of her immediate family living in the same rural community, Lucy finds it difficult to be her authentic self with anyone. Her father, whom she describes as a big influence in her life, threatened to disown Lucy if she ever disclosed her sexual orientation to anyone outside the family. She also thinks that many people her in small town are ‘judgmental’ and ‘close-minded’ to anyone who is different. These attitudes make Lucy fear for her safety and the well-being of her daughter. She feels forced to hide who she is so that her family will continue to support her and so others do not ostracize or belittle Ashlynn.

Lucy is a motivated, and hard-working mom, trying to support herself and her daughter. When she is blocked by messages that she is not accepted or supported, it becomes difficult for her to access services in her rural community.

"I wish I could get food stamps... that’s the biggest thing, food. Everything else we can manage, but we live on $50 every two weeks for food. It’s not the easiest thing in the universe, and this, the worst part is, to be completely honest, is the fact that the cheapest food to buy is the stuff that you don’t want to eat. Cause like, I like vegetables..."

> Dana, a 36 year old, bisexual, mom of an 8 year old child, living in rural Washington state

"The town itself keeps me so low-income that I really can’t progress. Because it’s a rural area. There’s a lot of just older people in this area and... they just look at me the wrong way and think I’m bad.

You can just feel they are disapproving. You can just feel it.”

> Iris, a 33 year old, bisexual, mom of 1 infant daughter, living in rural Massachusetts

The fact that rural LGBTQ mothers are already using support services for low-income families necessitates that culturally competent services are provided, agency policies are supportive of sexual minorities, and steps are taken to ensure that LGBTQ people have safe and judgment-free access to care. Your organization may already be implementing some of the recommendations below.

Implementing these recommendations would make your willingness to serve this population even more visible.

- Maintaining confidentiality is crucial. An individual may not be ‘out’ to everyone as a sexual minority even if he or she has chosen to disclose this identity to you.
- Consider the beliefs and attitudes reflected in your agency’s mission statement. Ensure that all policies and personnel enact professional and ethical service for all clients, regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status.
- This may mean implementing a new written nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity. Example available here: http://glifoundation.org/grants/within-colorados/gender-expression-toolkit/sample-nondiscrimination-policy/
- Enforce these anti-discrimination and harassment policies at all times.
- Provide ongoing training opportunities for all staff members that include comprehensive education about LGBTQ issues.
- Example training materials for LGBTQ cultural competence can be found here: http://www.diversityva.gov/training/
- Display LGBTQ-affirming images in agency materials – such as safe zone stickers, pink triangles, rainbows, or same-sex couples.
- Posters and resources available here: http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/rg-posters.html
- Ensure that policy language and assessment protocol does not unfairly disadvantage LGBTQ people or same-sex couples (for example, do not use legal marriage as criteria if same-sex marriage is banned in your state).

Employment non-discrimination laws (e.g. ENDA) at the local, state, and federal levels will help alleviate workplace discrimination and may prevent some of the risks of poverty for LGBTQ people by removing the disproportionate barriers to employment and compensation.

Relationship recognition laws (i.e., marriage rights for same-sex couples) will also improve the financial situation for many sexual minorities, providing access to employee-sponsored health care and other benefits. They also normalize same-sex couples as just another type of family unit in America

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