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

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## A note about trans\*:

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 different than the sex assigned to them at birth. That 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 RFSH 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/entry/transgender-workers-at-greater-risk-for-unemployment-and-poverty>

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## About this brief:

This policy brief was developed by Elizabeth Holman, MS, MSW, Dr. Ramona Oswald, Dina Izenstark, MS, Shawn Mendez, MS, and Dr. Kim Greder. Data were collected in conjunction with the cooperative multi-state research project NC1171 Interactions of Individual, Family, Community, and Policy Contexts on the Mental and Physical Health of Diverse Rural Low Income Families (commonly known as "Rural Families Speak about Health"). Cooperating states are California, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming. Support for the inclusion of sexual minority mothers was specifically provided by a grant to Ramona Oswald from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Research Board.

More information about this project can be found at [www.ruralfamiliespeak.org](http://www.ruralfamiliespeak.org).

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## 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!

# STRENGTHENING SERVICES FOR LGBTQ CLIENTS: Best Practice Recommendations for Rural Low-Income Service Providers

## 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,<sup>4, 5</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>. 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.

## Myths & Facts

**Myth:** Sexual minorities live mostly in urban communities. No one in my rural community is gay.

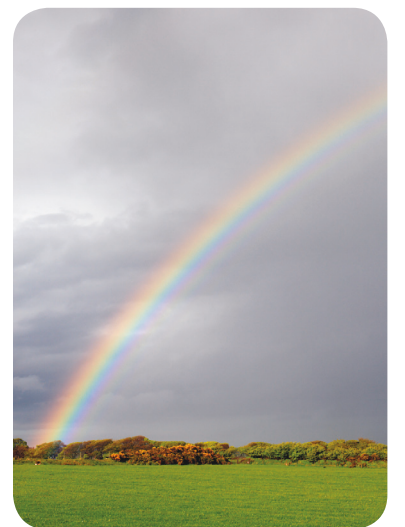
**Fact:** Individuals in your town may identify as LGBTQ even if there is not a visible gay community. Current information from the US Census and other large population surveys shows us that same-sex couples live in all types of communities across the United States<sup>1</sup>. Sexual minorities can be found in large cities as well as small, rural, close-knit towns. In fact, LGBTQ parents are more likely to live in family-friendly neighborhoods in suburban and rural communities<sup>2</sup>. LGBTQ people, like many others, choose to live outside of cities because they prefer a less densely populated neighborhood, believe there is less stress living in a rural area, and enjoy the country and natural amenities available<sup>3</sup>.

**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<sup>7</sup>. LGBTQ people have a more difficult time getting hired, often receive less compensation and benefits compared to heterosexual people in the same position, and may experience a more hostile work environment because of harassment from colleagues<sup>4, 5</sup>. As of Sept. 2014, it is still legal to fire someone based on their sexual orientation alone in 29 states<sup>6</sup>. Also, not all same-sex couples have two incomes, and no children. One or both individuals may be unemployed/underemployed and/or have children. Same-sex couples may choose to have a child together through adoption or artificial insemination/surrogacy – but they may also bring children into their family from a previous relationship.

**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:** Sexual orientation – identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer – describes a person's romantic or sexual interests or attractions. This may or may not align with romantic or sexual behavior. For example, individuals who identify as bisexual may feel romantic or sexual interests towards men or women. A woman who identifies as bisexual may currently be in a relationship with a man (her behavior), but still identify as bisexual (her identity or sexual orientation). So, someone may identify as a sexual minority even in a relationship with someone of a different sex. See the back page for more key terms and definitions.



**‘RURAL FAMILIES SPEAK ABOUT HEALTH’** is a multi-state project that focused on learning about issues such as food insecurity and access to community resources experienced by 444 families with low incomes living in rural communities across the United States.

**19 women who participated in this project identified as lesbian or bisexual. All of these sexual minority mothers interacted with social service providers in some way:**

- 84.2% received SNAP benefits
- 73.7% received WIC services
- 52.6% received food at a food bank in the past year
- 47.4% received TANF
- 31.6% resided in subsidized housing units
- 26.3% received LIHEAP
- 15.8% received unemployment benefits
- 11.1% received General Assistance benefits

Approximately 1/3 of these 19 families experienced food insecurity.

**Lucy's Story**

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.

Rural communities like Lucy's are often tightly organized entities upholding certain values and family structures. This can be difficult to navigate for anyone who feels like an outsider, even if they have belonged to that community for generations, like Lucy's family. Accessing services or asking for financial help could be easier for Lucy if she felt that her local agencies were a safe space for her to be herself – even if that means just talking to her caseworker without feeling judged or having to constantly minimize or hide a part of herself. It can be difficult for Lucy to open up and share her life experiences with her WIC coordinator when she is afraid to reveal her lesbian identity or previous relationships with women.

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

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Service Providers**

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://gillfoundation.org/grants/within-colorado/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.diversity.va.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).

**Law Makers**

- 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

**LGBTQ People**

- Know your rights. Seek legal advice if you feel you are being discriminated against. Call Lambda Legal's Help Desk toll-free at 1-866-542-8336 for information or assistance.
- Disclose your sexual minority status, if you feel safe to do so. Disclosure shows others that LGBTQ people do exist in your community. You may be serving as a role model for other sexual minorities and can bring awareness of LGBTQ issues to your neighbors.