

YOUTH EQUALITY PROJECT



RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY YOUTH NEEDS

Who are LGBTQ Youth? The phrase “LGBTQ” is a short-cut expression for youth who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning. This string of letters is intended to be inclusive of various individual experiences with sexual orientation and gender identity. Research indicates that 5 to 10 percent of the general population self-identify as LGBTQ.

LGBTQ youth are often exposed to harassment, harm, and family rejection.

Multiple research studies disturbing conclusions regarding LGBTQ youth: one in three report physical violence by family after they self-disclose their sexual orientation; 5 times more likely to attempt suicide and 3 times more likely to have been injured or threatened with a weapon at school than their heterosexual peers; five times more likely to avoid school because they feel unsafe; and are disproportionately represented among homeless youth populations who live on the streets. LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of sexual assault and physical violence from their family members than their heterosexual peers, which may result in foster care placements. LGBTQ youth in foster care often experience continued harm: 70% of LGBTQ youth in group homes reported violence based on their status; 100% LGBTQ youth in group homes reported verbal harassment based on their status; and 78% of LGBTQ youth ran away because of hostility about their status.

Prince George’s County LGBTQ youth have experienced discrimination and rejection.

Review of real case stories about LGBTQ foster youth in Prince George’s County finds:

- A daughter came out to her mother when she was 13 and was thrown out of the home so that she would not influence her younger siblings.
- One foster youth lived with a foster mother for several years and was about to be adopted. Feeling safe for the first time in his life, the boy told the foster mother he was gay. The foster mother stopped the adoption process, asked the boy to leave her home, and encouraged other foster youth in the home to refer to the boy as ‘fag.’
- One lesbian foster youth was told by her foster parents that she would go to hell for being a lesbian. For over a year, the teenager attempted to alter her hair and dress to appear more feminine in order to please her new foster parents and God, but attempted suicide when she continued to struggle with her sexual identity.
- One youth asked her school principal if it was okay to wear pants to the prom, her principal responded, “Sure, if you want everyone to think you’re a lesbian.”
- A foster mother alleged that she found her foster daughter in a ‘compromising situation’ with another girl. The foster mother had her adult son pack up the foster daughter’s belongings and drop the foster daughter off at a nearby mall. The foster mother didn’t even call the County about the forcible eviction. The foster daughter called CASA who found her an emergency placement.
- A teenager was ‘outed’ as a lesbian to her doctor. During a routine examine, the male doctor said, “So you think you’re a lesbian? Have you ever been with a man? Well, how does this feel?” The doctor then proceeded to forcefully ‘examine’ her.
- A transgender male to female youth entered foster care when she was thirteen. She was physically and sexually abused after being placed in an all-male group home. Her social worker offered no assistance

in helping the youth talk with her group home staff about her gender identity saying she “doesn’t know anything about any of that stuff.” The youth now hangs out in DC and has been sexually assaulted.

OUR VISION AND WORK

What is the Prince George’s County YOUTH EQUALITY PROJECT? A community task force comprised of state and local government personnel, youth advocates, and private citizens committed to establishing a spectrum of services necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of LGBTQ youth in Prince George’s County. The task force was created in 2007 as a result of a need observed by Prince George’s County’s Department of Social Services (DSS) and Prince George’s County’s Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA).

Vision: *The vision of the Youth Equality Project is to ensure that all LGBTQ youth have safe and nurturing homes, schools, and community environments in which to achieve their full potential.*

Our Collaborative Work: As a coalition of public and private citizens, the Youth Equality Project (YEP) works to improve community planning, coordinate strategies, and expand advocacy to ensure positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth. Our on-going work plan to facilitate inter-agency coordination between county systems includes representatives from County child welfare, juvenile justice, courts, schools, community nonprofit organizations, and legal advocacy systems.

Achieving Positive Impacts and Outcomes to Support LGBTQ Youth in Prince George’s County: In the first two years of the Youth Equality Project’s existence, we have been able to achieve the following:

- Creation of a Group Home Bill of Rights which has been proposed as a state-wide initiative;
- Published a Resource Guide of LGBT youth programs in the Greater Washington metropolitan area;
- Hosted two focus groups and a listening session of LGBTQ youth in Prince George’s County; and
- Offered training to residential group home professionals to bolster social work practices and improve residential care of LGBTQ foster youth in Maryland;

The Youth Equality Project has identified the following priority work goals for 2009 and 2010:

1. Creating a safe, social space for LGBTQ youth in Prince George’s County to build healthy and safe peer-to-peer and adult-to-youth relationships;
2. Addressing the unmet residential and positive youth development needs of LGBTQ youth;
3. Collecting data and information to present a thorough youth needs assessment,
4. Raising public awareness;
5. Disseminating resources to professionals and community centers serving LGBTQ youth;
6. Offering training and technical assistance to youth service professionals about LGBTQ youth; and
7. Reforming state and county policies and practices to better serve LGBTQ youth.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

Get Involved! As a community coalition we rely on the volunteer efforts. Our work must be sustained by community involvement to create change. If you wish to offer your time and service please contact Ann Marie Foley Binsner at Prince George’s County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program by calling (301) 209-0491 or email her at staff@pgcasa.org.

Invest! Our efforts to create a safe and social space for LGBTQ youth, collect information, disseminate resources, and offer professional training also requires financial support. Contributions made to the work of YEP through the Prince George’s County CASA program are tax deductible. Please, give serious consideration to offering individual financial contributions of \$50 to \$200. If you belong to a community organization or faith community that wishes to sponsor a fundraiser for our organization, we would be happy to assist in the planning and preparation of the event.