Essential Skills for Working with LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Tuesday, September 28, 2010

Handout Materials

New York State
Office of
Children & Family
Services

New York State
Office of Children and Family Services
and
PDP Distance Learning Project

David A. Paterson
Governor

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Informational Letter

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To:	Commissioners of Social Services Executive Directors of Voluntary Authorized Agencies
Issuing Division/Office:	Strategic Planning and Policy Development
Date:	December 30, 2009
Subject:	**Promoting a Safe and Respectful Environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Placement**
Suggested Distribution:	Directors of Social Services Adoption Supervisors Planning Coordinators Staff Development Coordinators
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Attachments:	No
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I. Purpose

The purpose of this Informational Letter (INF) is to reinforce the commitment of the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to promoting a safe and respectful environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in out-of-home placement. This INF also provides guidance and resources to assist social services districts and voluntary agencies to become more knowledgeable and competent in the care and provision of services to LGBTQ youth in out-of-home placement.

II. Background

According to the Child Welfare League of America and Lambda Legal, approximately 5-10% of the general population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Additional youth are unsure of their gender or sexual identity and are in the process of questioning. LGBTQ adolescents are estimated to make up an even higher, disproportionate share of America's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Some young people are in out-of-home care solely as a result of their LGBTQ identity. Once in foster care, bias against them may make it harder to find permanent placements for them, prolonging their stay in the child welfare system. Also, LGBTQ youth often face problems of harassment at school and are at risk of substance abuse and depression.

On March 17, 2008, OCFS issued a policy to maintain and promote a safe environment for LGBTQ youth placed in OCFS-operated residential and after-care programs. This policy specifically prohibits all OCFS staff, volunteers, and contract providers from engaging in any form of discrimination against or harassment of youth based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The policy further prohibits harassment or discrimination of youth by other youth. OCFS reaffirmed its commitment to promoting a safe and respectful environment for LGBTQ youth in the OCFS Youth Development Policy Statement that was issued on September 30, 2009, to local districts, voluntary agencies, youth bureaus, and OCFS facility directors. The OCFS Youth Development Policy Statement includes the expectation that all children and youth in programs operated or regulated by OCFS will receive appropriate individualized treatment that respects gender and sexual orientation.

III. Program Implications

OCFS strongly encourages local districts and voluntary agencies to adopt written policies and promote practices that prohibit discrimination of LGBTQ youth because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. These policies and practices should include youth who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning and those who are perceived by others as LGBTQ.

To assist districts and agencies in developing policies and practices to address the needs of LGBTQ youth in out-of-home placement, this INF provides information on relevant definitions, general practice guidelines, and a list of Internet resources.

Definitions

LGBTQ is an abbreviation commonly used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning individuals.

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to persons of the same or different gender.

Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of self as male, female, no gender, or another gender.

Gender expression refers to the manner in which a person expresses his or her gender through clothing, appearance, behavior, speech, etc. A person's gender expression may vary from the norms traditionally associated with his or her assigned sex at birth. Gender expression is a separate concept from sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, a male may exhibit feminine qualities, but identify as a heterosexual male.

Lesbian refers to a female who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to other females.

Gay refers to a person who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to people of the same gender identity. Sometimes, it may be used to refer to gay men and boys only. It is preferred over the term "homosexual."

Bisexual refers to a person who is attracted to, and may form sexual and romantic relationships with, males and females.

Transgender may be used as an umbrella term to include all persons whose gender identity or gender expression does not match society's expectations of how an individual of that gender should behave in relation to his or her gender. For purposes of protection from discrimination and harassment, transgender refers to both self-identified transgender individuals and individuals perceived as transgender. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning.

Questioning refers to a person, often an adolescent, who is exploring or questioning issues of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression in his or her life. Some questioning people will ultimately identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or heterosexual.

Practice Guidelines for Promoting a Safe and Respectful Environment for LGBTQ Youth

Do not ask youth if they are LGBTQ

The only way that a person knows another person's sexual orientation or gender identity is if they tell you. There are no tools or instruments to assess a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Youth will disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to staff when, and if, they feel ready. This can only occur if there is a safe environment and trusting relationship has been created for such disclosure. Services providers should not directly ask youth if they are LGBTQ.

Affirm the cultural identity of youth

Programs should affirm the cultural identity of the youth whom they serve in order to create supportive environments for them. It is important that educational books and other reading materials be available for youth interested in learning more about LGBTQ identity. Materials should be made available in languages other than English, as needed. Youth should have access to supportive resources that provide age-appropriate LGBTQ information, including a book list, website list of community resource supports, and advocacy groups. LGBTQ informational materials should be visible, in common areas, offices, etc., signifying that staff are knowledgeable and open to communication on this topic.

Staff Training

Districts and agencies should encourage training of staff on LGBTQ issues and how to avoid discriminatory practices with LGBTQ youth, so that staff can become knowledgeable on this topic and open to discussions when approached by youth.

Resources

www.cwla.org – *Child Welfare League of America*

www.lambdalegal.org – *Lambda Legal*

www.thetaskforce.org/issues/youth - *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*

www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource – *Youth Resource*

/s/ Nancy W. Martinez

Issued By:
Name: Nancy W. Martinez
Title: Director
Division/Office: Strategic Planning and Policy Development

Questions I Have

Name: _____ Daytime Phone: (_____)_____

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- Fax this form to: (518)-408-3840