As a service of the Children’s Bureau and member of the T&TA network, in our new cooperative agreement, NRCPFC has committed to ensuring that our work is attentive to the needs of young people and families that fall outside the average and sometimes live within the margins. In this issue, we will explore the theme of Inclusive Child Welfare Practice with LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) Populations. We hope that the information we provide will be a useful resource to those working to achieve permanency and family connections for children and youth in the child welfare system, and that it will encourage approaches that are inclusive and supportive of all children, youth, and families, including LGBTQ people. This issue includes several articles that focus on how agencies can become more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive in their work with LGBTQ resource families.

Since our last issue of Permanency Planning Today, we’ve begun working on some exciting new initiatives—one of these initiatives is highlighted in the article on our work with Family Connections grantees. NRCPFC also recently launched a new website featuring Digital Stories from the Field; in this issue, we provide information on this project and how NRCPFC has used digital stories in our work with States, Territories, Tribes, Tribal Organizations, Tribal Consortia and Children’s Bureau grantees to promote continuous improvement in the delivery of child welfare services.

NRCPFC continues to offer on site training and technical assistance to States, Territories, Tribes, and other publicly supported child welfare agencies on a wide range of issues which promote sustainable systemic reform in child welfare. NRCPFC is particularly focused on working with states throughout all stages of the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), including the development and implementation of the States’ Program Improvement Plans (PIP). You can learn about the T&TA we offer by visiting the NRCPFC website at: http://nrcpfc.org. Additionally, part of our ongoing commitment continues to be to support Foster Care Managers and the work of the National Association of State Foster Care Managers and to be involved as an active partner in organizing National Foster Care Month, which takes place every May. Through the provision of information services, resources, training, and technical assistance, NRCPFC aims to support those involved in child welfare in achieving positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Best Regards,

Gary

Permanency Planning Today: Summer 2010
Sample Areas of Training & Technical Assistance for States & Tribes include:

- Engagement, retention and support of LGBTQ resource families and dual licensure issues for LGBTQ foster and adoptive families
- Working with Family Support and Preservation Workers to support LGBTQ youth remaining in their families of origin
- Promoting practices to insure placement stability for LGBTQ youth, the underpinning of which are sound LGBTQ-affirming practices in assessment, case planning, active engagement of families and case management
- Promoting the practice of family search and engagement strategies to identify all family members, including LGBTQ family members, for children and youth separated from their birth families
- Working with States and Tribes to develop LGBTQ affirming policies and practices
- Promoting practices that build relationships between Tribes and States and LGBTQ community-based resources

For a full list of sample T&TA focused on LGBTQ issues available through NRCPFC, visit:
http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/TAforStatesandTribes_LGBTQ.pdf

Resources on LGBTQ Issues & Child Welfare:
The NRCPFC LGBTQ Issues & Child Welfare webpage offers:
- Resources on LGBTQ Children and Youth
- Resources on LGBTQ Parents
- Resources from the States
- Resources on Legislation
- NRCPFC Information Packets
- PowerPoint Presentations
- Bibliographies
- Links to relevant websites

To access these resources, visit the NRCPFC website at:
WHAT IS ALL CHILDREN–ALL FAMILIES?
All Children–All Families is a program for, and an approach to, creating long term systemic change in child welfare agencies so that LGBT individuals and families are seen as a valuable resource, welcomed, and given the opportunity to go through the process of becoming foster/adoptive families without experiencing bias and double standards. All Children–All Families supports agencies in working toward ensuring that LGBT resource families are treated with dignity and respect, and that the entire agency—particularly everyone who interfaces with resource families—is knowledgeable and has the basic skills and awareness to work competently with LGBT families.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF ALL CHILDREN–ALL FAMILIES?
Ultimately, the goal is to increase the pool of qualified resource families—that’s the main motivation for this process. There are lots of folks out there in the LGBT community who, if they knew they were welcome, would be interested in becoming resource families. This would mean that we would have many more families and therefore, better permanency outcomes.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR AN AGENCY TO PARTICIPATE IN ALL CHILDREN–ALL FAMILIES?
We’ve created a framework for how agencies can participate. Agencies that are committed to LGBT capacity-building and cultural competence can start by signing a pledge of commitment, which is a way of publicly saying, “We are inclusive in our approach. We aim to implement these practices.” The next step is to complete an agency self-assessment. The online agency self-assessment allows administrators who are overseeing this work to get a good measure of where their agency stands in terms of some of the criteria we have established. For example, the self-assessment covers:

- Are written policies with regard to non-discrimination explicitly inclusive of LGBT people?
- Does the agency convey this policy to the community through its website and print materials?
- Are LGBT issues addressed in staff training?
- What is the attitude and comfort level of agency staff in working with LGBT people?

The self-assessment provides a baseline measure related to 10 benchmarks that we’ve created based on years of experience and observation, as well as conversations with folks all over the country, including both child welfare professionals and LGBT families. The assessment tells an agency how many of the benchmarks it has met and provides a roadmap for where it needs to focus its resources in order to improve. We have a consultant who works with agencies and provides technical assistance. So let’s say there’s an agency that has met 8 of 10 benchmarks. Perhaps they need to meet the benchmark around staff training, for instance, so that their clinical staff can conduct non-biased, helpful home studies with LGBT single people or couples. We have a training curriculum that covers this topic, and our consultant would work with the agency director(s) to explore how to offer this training—considering things like when in the current fiscal year it can be offered, how many staff will attend, and other logistical issues. We have trainers identified who customize the training based on the agency’s needs. Training is a big piece of this program.

Our Promising Practices Guide offers real, concrete information that agencies can use to help work toward the 10 benchmarks. It covers topics such as how agencies have been transformed, how they dealt with staff who were resistant, how people in the agency responded to changes—it’s a guide for walking through these changes and sustaining them. When agencies achieve all 10 benchmarks, we present them with a seal of recognition, which means that they’ve really made a commitment to working effectively with LGBT people and expended all kinds of resources to change and improve their practice. We’ve issued seven seals so far. LGBT community members often look for something that says, “It’s ok for you to come here.” Agencies can put the seal on their website or recruitment materials to send that message. The seal is an incentive, but it’s not the driving incentive for agencies to participate in the program: The comprehensive approach we have developed and the support around ensuring that all the different components of the agency are on board are really important.

What I’ve described so far is the formal engagement process: taking the pledge, completing the assessment, utilizing technical assistance, and working toward achieving the benchmarks through an ongoing relationship with All Children–All Families. A lot of agencies and professionals aren’t yet formally engaged in All Children–All Families, but have realized that they need to do basic cultural competence training, and are using the guide and having conversations with us about their work to improve practice at their agency. For instance, we have been working with folks in one city, where they are utilizing the guide, and we’ve provided them with consulting on an ad hoc basis to support them in making improvements. Although they are not in a place where they want to sign the pledge and be identified as part of All Children - All Families, they have found that our tools and resources are useful and have opened the door for people to talk about these topics.
WHY IS TRAINING SO IMPORTANT?
As we embarked on this rather challenging journey, we knew that we would learn a lot as we went along. We learned rather quickly, after the first year, that most agencies need training to fulfill the criteria of the benchmarks and to have a comprehensive approach to working with LGBT individuals and families. Sometimes the lack of training is due to budget limitations. Some agencies have considered themselves welcoming to LGBT people for a long time and never thought they needed to do training. However, some agencies have told us that as they started to formalize their approach to working with LGBT resource families, they realized that people on their staff had varied opinions, comfort levels, or experiences with the LGBT community. Training really moves people to a new level.

When we realized the need for training and professional development was so great, we took a pause, and invested the better part of 2009 in developing a comprehensive training curriculum, which matches the structure of our Promising Practices Guide. The approach to training delivery includes doing things experientially, talking about case situations, and making it relevant to the practice environment. We tested it out with a few agencies and then did a training of trainers in September 2009. The curriculum focuses on how you recruit, retain, and support LGBT foster and adoptive families across the spectrum of your agency practice. There are a lot of resources available to agencies around supporting LGBT youth; however, we’re really talking about best practices with LGBT adults (single or in relationships) who are potential resource families. Our training includes raising awareness and also focuses on practice with resource families. It covers issues that come up with licensing, homes studies, and matching— for example, how to have a conversation with an eleven year old about different kinds of families. Before you even begin to do recruitment with the LGBT community, you have to ensure that you are ready: Staff need to be comfortable, fair, and unbiased in the way they work with and assess families. It needs to be ensured that the things that are being said and heard in the agency are affirming, welcoming things. We can help agencies that want to work toward institutionalizing their approach to inclusion.

WHAT ARE SOME STEPS THAT AGENCIES CAN TAKE TO ACHIEVE CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN WORKING WITH LGBTQ FOSTER & ADOPTIVE FAMILIES?
Here’s a really concrete thing that agencies can do (which is covered in assessment and built into our benchmarks): An agency can tour its own website, considering, “What does this say to members of the LGBT community? Are sexual orientation and gender identity mentioned in the non discrimination policy? Is the focus on married couples (particularly in states where same-sex couples cannot be legally married)? Are there only pictures of moms and dads together or are there a range of photos of different kinds of families?” There are lots of ways that an agency can convey a welcoming and inclusive environment, or as we say, “roll out the welcome mat.”

Kinship work presents another aspect of being LGBT-competent and supporting all prospective families. A child or youth might have a gay or transgender uncle or aunt, whose name might not come up at first if some people in the family don’t like the idea of that person being a caregiver for the child. However, that person might be a great resource. Being open and fair in considering LGBT family members is important. You may need to have a conversation with children of a certain age about this, but kids are quite comfortable with LGBT foster/adoptive parents and caregivers if they are given honest and factual information.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC ACTIONS THAT AGENCIES SHOULD TAKE, OR WHAT DO THEY NEED TO KNOW, TO WORK COMPETENTLY WITH TRANSGENDER OR GENDER NON-CONFORMING PROSPECTIVE PARENTS?
We have about 20-25 years of research and real life experiences of lesbian/gay-headed families— it was probably about 20 years ago that people who were “out” as lesbian or gay began starting families. Now, 20 years later, many young gay people say, “Of course I am going to have kids or adopt.” Although a lot of people in the LGB community might be gender non-conforming, generally folks who are LGB-identified have pushed through that first ceiling in terms of being viewed as good parents, with it being accepted that our children are fine. Folks that have undergone a gender transition, whether they identify as transgender or not, and are now considering becoming a parent as a single person or part of a couple— they are the pioneers at this moment. There isn’t the same body of research to fall back on. However, it is rational to think that one’s gender identity would not preclude anyone from having the capacity to parent. It is sometimes said that LGB people might have some insight and empathy around being marginalized from one’s family of origin and/or experiencing discrimination. This is sometimes true, and the folks I know who have transitioned have such amazing resiliency, tenacity, and clarity, and face more discrimination than people who are LGB. If folks have been able to live in a way that is whole and are where they need to be and are in a place to start a family— their children are going to have a strong advocate. I’m not saying this across the board— everyone needs to be assessed independently— but I’m just saying that in terms of understanding life experiences and strengths, we do not want to overlook the transgender community. Staff should assess transgender people just like anyone else in terms of their capacity to parent. Additionally, they can support transgender or gender non-conforming resource parents in discussing anything they want to cover— how you talk about your family, what children need to know, or practicing a narrative for talking to your child about your own childhood. These things may or may not even be an issue.

WHERE CAN PEOPLE GO FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ALL CHILDREN–ALL FAMILIES?
To learn more about All Children–All Families and to access the Promising Practices Guide, 3rd Edition, visit the Human Rights Campaign website at: www.hrc.org/acaf

Appendix 4-7
USING RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

An important part of cultural competence is using respectful language.

The glossary included in the All Children–All Families Guide explains:

The LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] “community is as diverse as the general population and includes people who are liberal and conservative, urban and rural, white, black, Latino, Asian, rich and poor, “closeted” and “out,” and everything in between.

This diversity means that not all LGBT people will use the same terms to define themselves or their families, and not all will have the same comfort level with certain words or labels. This glossary, however, provides a good overview of some of the terms commonly used by and familiar to LGBT people.”

It can be considered a starting point for becoming familiar and comfortable with these terms.

Access the guide and glossary at:
http://www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/adoptions/8941.htm. (See pages 85-88.)
What prompted your decision to work to make the L.A. County child welfare system more welcoming and inclusive for LGBTQ resource families? What was the goal?

This initiative came about because I heard that the Human Rights Campaign All Children–All Families (AC-AF) initiative had funding for recruitment of resource families, and as a public agency we’re always looking for resources. I started to explore it further and talked to Ellen, who explained what AC-AF offered, and that while there might be some assistance with recruitment, that is not really what this work is all about. Talking with Ellen and learning about the work of AC-AF was really inspiring, and I thought about how we could be doing a better job in our work with LGBTQ families. In Los Angeles, for as long as I’ve been working in adoption, which is many years, we’ve always worked with LGBTQ families. However, although we already work with the LGBTQ community, I realized that there were things we could do to be more competent and welcoming.

Back when I first heard about AC-AF, they were primarily working with relatively small agencies, with 30 or so people. In L.A. County, changes would have to take place on a much bigger scale, as there are close to 500 people in my Division. We knew that the process would have to be different in some respects. We asked ourselves, “How are we going to do this?” Even though we weren’t sure how we were going to do it, it seemed like a good idea, and the need became more apparent the more I thought about it. I talked with our management team, and they were on board. We set the goal of becoming more competent and earning the AC-AF seal.

What steps did you take?

The first step, after deciding to earn the AC-AF seal, was to establish a work group that included both internal and external participants. It was really helpful to have the AC-AF benchmarks, as they identified specific areas for our work group to look at, as well as a work path to follow. We began by looking at our non-discrimination statements for clients and staff. We needed to change them to include gender identity. It was easy to identify the change that needed to be made, but getting the statements changed was a more difficult process. However, we were able to get changes made and these statements do now include gender identity.

What were some of the challenges you faced?

The major challenges were not having data, not knowing staff attitudes, and the need for staff training (without the availability of additional funding).

Data: One challenge was getting data because we don’t track LGBTQ applicants, although, we know anecdotally that we are working with LGBTQ individuals and families. In order to address this issue, we did a survey of staff asking them to account for LGBTQ clients they had worked with during the last 12 months.

Staff Attitudes: Another big challenge was that, as a large agency, we didn’t really know the attitudes of our staff about working with LGBTQ individuals and families. We knew that some of our staff worked really well with LGBTQ clients, and some we really just didn’t know. With a smaller agency, managers probably know each and every staff member well, including their strengths, weaknesses, and training needs. It is different in a larger agency. That was one of the areas where it was helpful to get guidance from Ellen at AC-AF. Out of that discussion came the development of a survey that, in the future, we are planning to use to help us get a better sense of where staff are in terms of working with LGBTQ clients.

Training: Our work group faced the challenge of figuring out how to train a large number of staff without additional funding. We had approximately 475 staff members, of which 250 were social workers, and then there are also supervisors, managers, and support staff. We felt it was important to train staff at all levels so that they would know that we do work with LGBTQ clients, we do adoptions with LGBTQ individuals and families, and that this is in accordance with the law. We thought it was important that everyone on our team understood the mission of the Adoption and Permanency Resources Division, even if they don’t work with clients directly. The key to this was having two trainers from the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center’s Family Services Program participating in our work group.
They had a grant for some training and were willing to work with our staff to train everybody. They spent a lot of time preparing this training with a sub-group of staff from our Division. They came up with a curriculum and then shared it with Karey Scheyd, our consultant from AC-AF. She provided input on the curriculum and also observed the first training. The involvement of trainers from the LA Gay and Lesbian Center and AC-AF were key. It was also really critical that there were staff from our Division who were willing to go the extra mile to make this happen—they took this project on in addition to their regular workloads. The training was good, and at the same time, it wasn’t as comprehensive as I would have liked, given some of the challenges we faced. We provided a one day mandatory training. In the morning, we offered a sort of LGBTQ 101, including things like basic terminology, and relevant history and laws. The afternoon was devoted to adoption-specific information, like home studies, placements, and challenges families may face. The AC-AF program includes a longer training, and we are hoping to have technical assistance from a National Resource Center, as well, so that we can do a “train the trainers” workshop. I thought I would get pushback from our staff because I mandated this training, but I didn’t hear a word. The only feedback I got was about other important areas that we need to cover: Why isn’t there mandatory training specifically on working with African American or Latino clients, for example? I was able to address this by explaining that working with LGBTQ clients is one area that we are looking at now, and we certainly will look at other areas as well. In terms of the success of the training, it was important that this was a team effort and that a work group, including staff, developed it.

Initially, we had to decide whether our focus would be on the entire agency of over 7,000 people, or on the Adoption and Permanency Resources Division. We realized that we couldn’t get the whole agency up to that level (to earn the AC-AF seal) in a timely manner. Our Division holds the adoption license, rather than the entire agency, so we determined that our Division would be the entity that would work to earn the seal. In our Division, we have staff who recruit, train, and assess resource parents (to be foster and/or adoptive parents), and who provide post adoption services. Once we decided to focus on the Division, our next step was to figure out how we were going to approach it. We gathered a work group of internal and external folks to figure this out.

With a smaller agency, or with a private agency, depending on the size, perhaps there might be more control. In the County, I report to a Deputy Director, who reports to the Director, who reports to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, and so, I had to get the Deputy Director and Director’s buy in to move forward, which we did.

There were some considerations in terms of the political realities that come in to play—in terms of people’s opinions and comfort levels—and we had to work with those realities. In California, our laws are pretty supportive of LGBTQ families, which made it easier for us than it might be somewhere else, as laws and regulations do impact an agency’s work. At the same time, laws are one element, as even in an area with relatively supportive laws, not everyone may be on board politically. You need to be aware of this and work with it.

You’ve talked about the size of your agency. How is making changes on the county-wide level different than making changes within a smaller agency?

Visit the links below to view these “Parent Perspectives” stories.

The NRCPFC Digital Stories website includes Youth, Parent, Legal & Family Partner Perspectives. Go to page 16 of this newsletter to read more about the NRCPFC Digital Stories initiative.


Through Sandra’s story we learn about the importance of family voice and the ability to make system change. http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/Jimenez_S/index.htm
What outcomes have you seen as a result of your efforts?

We earned the seal last April. Since the training, our staff is more open to talking about challenges or questions they might have about working with LGBTQ clients. Before that, people didn’t really talk about those issues much. We are spread out across the county – we have staff in 18 different offices. Members of our staff raised the following issue: What if someone has a question related to LGBTQ issues and their supervisor isn’t sure how to respond? Can we have a team of people they can call about questions they may have about working with LGBTQ clients? Based on this idea, we developed a group of LGBTQ Liaisons in our Division. They had all been through training and had experience with the LGBT community and really wanted to serve as a resource for their colleagues.

We also have realized that we need more training and more information about working with transgender and gender non-conforming clients. In our training, we touched on this topic a little bit, and now we are working on getting more training about working with transgender resource parents. The training we had brought people up several notches in terms of comfort level and awareness, and it also let everyone know we aren’t done – this is an ongoing process.

What did you learn that you can share with other agencies that are beginning to make these types of changes?

Don’t go it alone. Having a work group is key. Bring in community partners and other folks outside your agency or division to try to get things done. Especially with resources being tight, a team effort can go a long way in helping you to achieve your goals. I recommend using the support that HRC AC-AF can provide. Ellen and her team were really instrumental and helpful in getting us through it. They assigned a consultant to our agency who made suggestions and brought up things that we didn’t think of, which was really helpful. I also recommend asking the National Resource Centers for training and technical assistance. Training is a big challenge if you don’t have the funds to hire trainers and don’t have the internal capacity to do the trainings. With the HRC AC-AF curriculum and the possibility of getting technical assistance through the provision of training for trainers through the National Resource Centers – there is a lot of opportunity.

In the future, what steps could LA County take to build on these successes?

It is great that our Division achieved the AC-AF seal, but staff in other departments also need to know the laws. Social workers get that training in academy when they are first hired, but as time goes on, people tend to forget. The work that we did energized people around this issue. Mitch Mason, who is Division Chief, Government Relations, and is responsible for training and formulating the Department’s strategic plan, pulled together staff from several different entities to address LGBTQ-related issues, and they have been meeting regularly for the last year or so. I just went to an excellent training that his work group had arranged on LGBTQ issues and how to work with families when their kids are coming out.

In order to do truly effective work, it is important that everyone is on board, comfortable, and trained. It is important that our adoption workers have been trained, but we also have workers that provide family reunification services who could benefit from additional training, and there is dual case assignment (involving an adoption worker and line worker sharing responsibility for a child). Many of our placements are with private foster families, and a private agency may have a contract that says they can’t discriminate, but they may not be required to provide training or may not know how to create a welcoming environment. We’ve invited private agencies to join us in this initiative. We’ve encouraged them to work toward earning the seal and we’ve offered to help them. It is important that everyone is competent in terms of working with LGBTQ children, youth, and families. We don’t want to end our work group after achieving the seal, because there is so much more to be done.

The best part is we’re getting some great homes for our kids. We have lots of kids who need safe, permanent, and loving homes, and we don’t want to exclude anybody.
Can you tell us about your family?
I adopted Julienne when she was four months old – it was me, as a single dad, and Julienne. I used to teach first and second grade, and have a lot of experience with kids. I always wanted to be a father, but I didn’t know how to make it work. I never had the right job, the right relationship, or was in the right city... I finally realized: If I am going to become a father, I just have to do it. So I went ahead. I have a lot of family members and friends who support me. Julienne is two and a half now. It took a long time to convince my grandmother that she wasn’t my biological child, because she looks and acts just like me. It has been a great experience. My extended family – my parents, sister, and grandmother – and my friends have given me a lot of support. My best friend lives in the same city, and is married with three sons. They were ecstatic to have a girl in the mix. My other best friend – he is my inspiration – he adopted three boys on his own. They’re teenagers now. I’ve seen them all grow up and I’ve been part of their lives.

To be honest, I was looking to adopt a two or three year old, not an infant. But I could see in Julienne’s eyes she was right for me when I met her. My parents helped me to get adjusted when I first adopted her. A lot of my friends are really involved in her life now, too. They will help by picking her up if I have to work late, for example, or just hanging out with her. Friends get mad if I don’t call every week to plan a play date, and even my neighbors have gotten in the mix. My neighbor and her husband have three kids, and every Monday, Julienne goes over to their house for dinner. Julienne is very independent and strong willed. Recently, my grandmother was showing her how to play piano. At first Grandma showed her how to play, then after a little while, Julienne said, “No, Grandma, that’s wrong.” She began to show Grandma how she should play. She likes to do things for herself and to figure out how to do things. I have to give her things she can do, because she loves to help out around the house, and to be part of everything I am doing.

Everyone thought I was a little crazy for deciding to raise a child on my own. You really don’t need to have a partner to become a parent, but what you do need to have is a plan and a routine. We definitely have a plan, and not a tight routine, but Julienne knows her schedule. She knows what she needs to do when she wakes up in the morning. I lay out her clothes the night before. She goes potty, puts her clothes on, has breakfast, brushes her teeth, and then plays with the dogs and the cat for a little while. And we can do it all in 45 minutes. It is the parent who makes this work, and it is the child, too, because she is very bright. People think she is three or four years old because she really talks to you and is so engaged. I have been very fortunate because she was exposed to drugs, but I believe with the right environment and support, a child can overcome almost anything.

You spoke about your family & friends. What other supports or resources were important to you in this process?
My social worker was wonderful – she listened to me on both good and bad days. I could ask her anything. I had an incident at Julienne’s preschool, and even though I hadn’t talked with her in months, I still felt I could contact her to talk about the situation. She helped me think it through and told me, “Your instinct is telling you that it is not right.” I wanted to make sure I was not being overly cautious or protective. Our conversation helped me to decide what I wanted to do in this situation. She is phenomenal – it’s really nice to have that relationship.

I know a lot of other families, both straight and gay, who adopted through private agencies or overseas. My biggest piece is that, I am adopted, and there are so many kids in the system who need homes – I want to extend that family onwards. People don’t know I am adopted, especially because I am just like my dad, exactly like him. I encourage everyone to look into state systems. I talk about this a lot when I go to adoption meetings. You never know what your experience will be as a parent – whether you’re an adoptive or birth parent. My father has always said to work in your own backyard, to start in your community.

What are the adoption meetings about?
The meetings are for new people considering becoming parents – a sort of orientation. I bring Julienne to the meetings. I talk to other people about my experience and why I opted for this route to becoming a parent. I had considered all different options and gone through all different thought processes, weighing the pros and cons of each one. I had thought about going the surrogate route (which is very expensive) and had also considered adopting a child from Ethiopia. I had started looking into adoption through a private agency. I knew I wanted an African American child and thought about going through an agency in a different state, such as Michigan, Texas, or New York, where there are higher numbers of African American children in the child welfare system. When I was asking about the process at one agency, I was told that there
were different fees for adopting children based on their race/ethnicity, for example, with a higher fee for White children than African American children. I said, “You’re telling me you put a different price on different ethnicities? Do you realize that I am African American?” They became apologetic about it, but it was quite disturbing. I was going through a private agency because I thought that, in some ways, it would be a better experience and reduce some of the risks potentially involved in adoption, but it is really about the parents and what you do as a parent. After that experience, I decided to go through the public system. One of the things you find out as you go through the process is that you can have a lot of support through the public child welfare system. I tell prospective parents, if they need help, they can talk to a social worker. My social worker was really helpful to me as I was thinking about and deciding what I was comfortable with and what I could handle. My social worker helped me deal with things as they came up; for example, at first, Julienne had trouble crawling and I was a little worried about it. But about two weeks after she moved in, she was crawling! After she moved in, she had a huge jump in terms of her mental growth, and she was walking at about 9 or 10 months.

Based on your experience, what would you want providers to know about working with the LGBTQ community?

My sexual orientation was discussed in my home study, but it was not an issue. The process was very open, and it wasn’t the focus of the home study: It was more about having a conversation about my life and what was going on with me.

I would ask child welfare workers to be sensitive about the types of questions they ask and to think about why they are asking them. I would like them to understand that there are many different types of healthy families and family structures. One of the questions I was asked by a social worker (at another agency that I decided not to go with) was whether there are female influences in my household. Yes, I have female friends and family members, but I was taken aback by the question. They were coming from a more traditional idea of family, based on the idea that there is a need for a male and a female in the household to raise children. It is important to know that there are so many single moms and single dads, and there are families with three dads, or two dads and two moms, or two dads and a mom. The social worker didn’t understand this and wasn’t thinking about different types of families. Like I said, at first, I was taken aback. I thought about it more, and later took offense, because that question was not really necessary.

What would you want other members of the LGBTQ community to know about your experience as a parent?

When you’re ready, you can decide what your own family is going to look like, and who will make up your family group. You don’t need someone else to define this for you. Some of my friends are thinking of adopting. They see that my life hasn’t stopped since I became a parent. It has changed and moved in a new direction, but I still go out, see my friends, go to parties, and play sports. I bring her with me. You do have to be with your child, but there are options. A lot of people are scared about being a parent. I was, too, at first, but you inherently know what to do – it comes to you.
You were one of the founding members of Center Kids in 1988, & have been working on LGBTQ family issues for over 20 years. How have things changed over time?

From the very beginning, adoption and foster parenting was a key pathway to parenting, and we’ve always wanted to support people in that pursuit. To go way back, the system really opened to LGBTQ people during the boarder baby crisis and AIDS (at least, that’s my perception), when the child welfare system was thinking, “Who will take these HIV positive, immune-compromised babies? Maybe gay people!” I think that was the crack in the door for us in foster care. Before that time, a lot of LGBTQ people felt the system was hostile—and by-and-large, it was. There was sometimes an attitude of acquiescence in terms of what workers were required to do, but if you were an LGBTQ person or family, your application would never get to the top of the pile. Additionally, there was sometimes an acceptance of LGBTQ people becoming parents, but for LBGTQ teens, not for babies.

A lot of people worked hard to bring about change. For example, John Mattingly came in as New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) Commissioner in 2004 and established LGBTQ issues as a priority for ACS. In 2000, we started the LGBTQ Foster Care Coalition, which included people from the New York State Office of Children and Families (OCFS), advisor groups, provider agency representatives such as parent recruiters, (and other LGBTQ groups, at first). The Coalition grew and became very established. A staff member from one of our provider agencies, Talbot Perkins Children’s Services, got a job at ACS working with Wednesday’s Child, and advocated on behalf of LGBTQ people from within ACS. Pre-dating our coalition, there was The LGBTQ Action Group, which brought together lawyers from advocacy organizations like the Urban Justice Center and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and representatives from Gay Men’s Health Crisis and other groups, and met within ACS. They focused on issues impacting LGBT youth in care and are still active today. ACS eventually put together a strategic plan for LGBT inclusion and they work hard to make it real and hit their benchmarks. At one point, they had a full-time LGBTQ Liaison within ACS. Unfortunately, budget limitations have sometimes presented challenges for ACS in meeting some of their goals for working with LGBTQ children, youth, and families, but because we all work together so closely, the work is getting done.

Meanwhile, our little coalition kept chugging along. We focused a lot of our energy on caseworker training. Training is very important for a number of reasons. One reason it is necessary to provide regular trainings is high caseworker turnover rates. This means that there are always new staff people coming in who need to be trained. We came across some child welfare workers with faith-based objections to parenting by LGBTQ people, as well as people who didn’t think they’d ever known a gay person, and in these instances, training was really needed for these workers to fulfill their responsibilities in working with LGBTQ prospective resource families. We also hosted recruitment events for LGBTQ people interested in becoming foster and adoptive parents through the child welfare system. We eventually secured grants to pay staff people, and we are now developing a model agencies program focusing on creating significant lasting change within foster care agencies through training and technical assistance around LGBTQ issues. We will certify these model agencies as LGBTQ-friendly and LGBTQ-competent. At the same time, we also provide large scale trainings in each borough to reach larger numbers of child welfare professionals and agencies.

Another way things have changed is that now greater numbers of people are giving foster care a second look. The system is much better than it used to be for LGBTQ people. At the same time, international adoption has moved toward greater constriction and constraint, and there are fewer international adoptions now than in past years—which accounts in part for the increase in adoptions through the foster care system. But regardless of the challenges, I can honestly say (and do, to any competent person who talks to me about wanting to adopt), if they want to parent a child, they will. Their sexual orientation can still sometimes be an impediment, but it is not going to stop them from parenting if they’re determined and patient. In the past, adoption by LGBTQ people was considered a revolutionary

[1] As long as they are assessed to be safe, appropriate caregivers, in the same way that all resource parents must be assessed.
thing to do, unheard of, and strange. At the very beginning, LGBTQ people trying to become adoptive or foster parents were sometimes closeted about their sexual orientation, as much as they could be (perhaps presenting a partner as a roommate) because of discrimination within the system. In New York City, at least, those days are over.

“We’ve made tremendous progress, and at the same time, we still have a lot of work to do.”

What other type of progress has been made in terms of child welfare & LGBTQ families?

Over the last generation, there has been a steadily growing body of reliable research on the competency of LGBTQ families, including the capacity of LGBTQ people to parent and the well-being of children raised by LGBTQ parents. This research has helped to dispel myths and disabuse old, false confabulations (for example, wrongly associating child sexual abuse with LGBTQ people). This research has proven that children are safe with LGBTQ people. While this seems fundamental, it’s a big step. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association (among other professional associations) endorse LGBTQ parenting, and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute has published extensively on LGBTQ adoption. It is not just that practitioners must do the fair thing in terms of allowing LGBTQ people to become adoptive or foster parents. There is evidence-based practice grounded in solid social science research around LGBTQ parenting which can help shape child welfare policies and increase opportunities for permanence for kids in the system.

What is an area where we still have work to do in terms of engaging LGBTQ people as resource families?

One area where we are really lacking is around adoption and foster parenting by transgender and gender non-conforming people. The whole narrative around transgender parenting has been around loss, including the complete loss of custody of biological children (and often even visitation). We recently had an event at the Center focused on transgender parenting and families with a transgender family member. ACS and foster care agencies came and provided information and were affirming about inviting transgender parents. Based on both historic and current discrimination, a lot of transgender people have reason to believe that they won’t be well-received as prospective parents. The system should do much more outreach to transgender people and staff training on gender identity and expression. I know from our training that gender non-conformity and other gender-related issues are areas that folks have the most trouble understanding.

What are examples of ways that agencies can support LGBTQ individuals or couples in becoming foster & adoptive parents?

Inclusive paperwork. It sounds trivial but it isn’t – paperwork speaks loudly to prospective parents. Inclusive paperwork sends the message that the agency notices LGBTQ families and diverse families in general, and has made accommodation. This is of enormous importance. Inclusive paperwork means using gender neutral language (not specifying mother and father, for instance, when talking about parents). Additionally, it is important for agency websites to be bold about depicting same sex household images, and that whatever they say that relates to straight people is also inclusive of LGBTQ people. For instance, if they have a newsletter that tells adoption stories, it would be important that LGBTQ family stories are included. Basically, it is important that agencies don’t just talk about LGBTQ families when gay people come in, but instead, LGBTQ families should be made visible and embraced when speaking to any audience, whether in the room, on the website, or in recruitment materials. Agencies should also develop recruitment materials that are specifically targeted to LGBTQ prospective parents.

It is also important that agencies understand and communicate their understanding that LGBTQ people are not only interested in LGBTQ teens. While finding homes for queer teens is critically important, LGBTQ prospective resource families should not be limited in this way. They are not different from straight people in the sense that, while some prospective parents may be interested in fostering or adopting older youth, many want to foster or adopt babies or younger children.

You mentioned that you do LGBTQ awareness & anti-bias training. Can you tell us about the training?

The training I provide is pretty much “Homophobia 101.” There are a number of good trainings out there, for example, those developed by NASW with Lambda Legal, Child Welfare League of America, ACS, and the Human Rights Campaign. [See the interview with Ellen Kahn from Human Rights Campaign, also in this issue of Permanency Planning Today.] We are not trying to reinvent the wheel. We work with these trainings, and I also adapt trainings that I have developed for schools, because the issues are similar. We help people to understand the difference between sex and sexuality and the difference between sexuality and gender, as well as how homophobia and transphobia hurts all of us (regardless of our sexual orientation or gender identity). Some of the topics covered are basic LGBTQ terminology and statistics about the vulnerability of LGBTQ youth, particularly in the child welfare system. We also familiarize people with the applicable laws. Sometimes our Coalition provides training in a panel format, and we always include LGBTQ young people, as well as LGBTQ parents who have adopted through the system. These trainings typically take place in the context of a fair, and participating agencies are invited to share information. For the last year or so, we have also offered MAPP trainings at the Center every Saturday, provided by staff
from You Gotta Believe! The staff member includes LGBTQ content so that the trainings are inclusive and meet LGBTQ participants’ needs for relevant information. We recently partnered with ACS and held a Meet and Greet Event with LGBTQ young people and prospective parents. The efforts are still a work-in-progress, but they’re certainly coming along. The New York City system allows for innovative work to be done and really, genuinely wants to be inclusive of LGBTQ people, not just because it’s the law.

**What resources do you feel would be useful to LGBTQ families or those working with LGBTQ families across the country?**

In addition to the resources on the Center’s website (www.gaycenter.org), the Evan B. Donaldson Institute offers a variety of resources (www.adoptioninstitute.org). Adoptive Families (www.adoptivefamilies.com) magazine is fantastic, and addresses some of the tougher issues. The adoption community shares a lot of issues with those involved with reproductive technologies, and each of these areas can educate and inform the other—making this connection is a relatively new development.

One of the most valuable and informative resources available is people who are willing to share their experiences. Adults who were raised in trans-racial and trans-cultural families are talking about what are, for them, “the best interests of the child”, and helping shift adoption practice toward being more child-centered, rather than adult-centered. These insights can help to improve practice related to openness in the adoption process, access to information, and what cultural competence really means if you are parents adopting or fostering a child or youth of a different race. For example, for white families who adopt a child of color, this means shifting their identity to a family of color, rather than thinking of themselves as white parents with a child of color. It is important to explore what that paradigm shift really means. The first generation of young people who were raised in LGBTQ households are now young adults, and they are also beginning to talk about what they themselves define as “best practices.” There is now so much information coming from adoptees— it’s a big deal.