



SUPPORTING AND AFFIRMING LGBTQIA2S+ YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS: TIP SHEET

BACKGROUND

This tip sheet was developed as a tool to support Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) programs, organizations, and their communities by outlining effective practices for supporting, affirming, and improving outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, and two spirit, as well as non-binary and gender expansive (LGBTQIA2S+) youth and young adults. Many of these effective practices are rooted in trauma-informed care and Positive Youth Development evidence-based frameworks. The detailed recommendations identify actionable steps organizations can take to provide safe, supportive, and affirming services; outline ways individuals can contribute to a healthy and inclusive work environment; and provide organizations and programs with critical questions to consider in their role of creating equitable systems and improved outcomes for LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

The practices outlined in this Tip Sheet are youth-informed. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance and Capacity Building Center (RHYTTAC) has engaged youth and young adult consultants with lived expertise in housing insecurity and systems of care, including youth and young adults who identify as LGBTQIA2S+, in the design and development of this training and technical assistance (TTA) resource. RHYTTAC and these consultants are available to support RHY grant recipients to ensure that program services are safe and affirming for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults.

HOW RHY PROJECTS CAN SUPPORT AND AFFIRM LGBTQIA2S+ YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

OUTREACH STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS

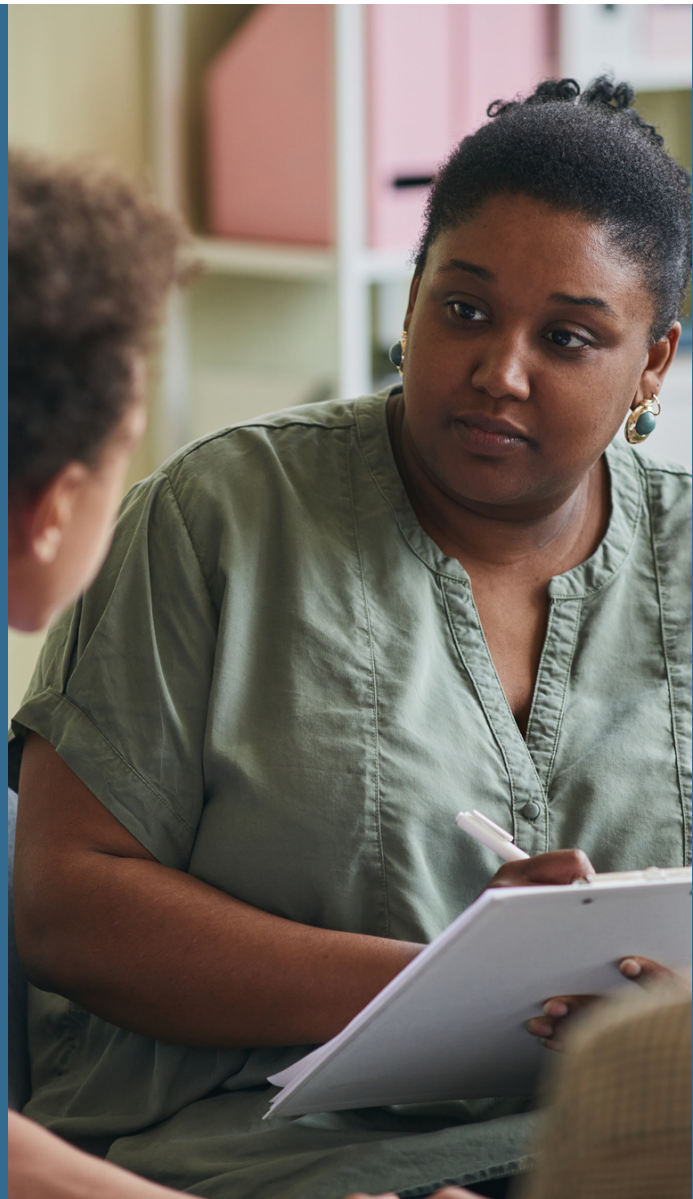
- **Build Trust and Allyship:** Consistent displays of transparency, allyship, and respect for youth's identities create the foundation for effective outreach and building trust. Intentionally seeking to understand and building trusting relationships with youth through close listening and authentic connection creates a more meaningful impact with young people, and actively combats the cumulative effects of trauma experienced by LGBTQIA2S+ young people such as loss of identity and trust.
- **Diversify Partnerships:** Through community mapping, organizations can identify untapped outreach and engagement resources in the local LGBTQIA2S+ community. For example, forming Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with explicitly LGBTQIA2S+-affirming businesses, religious and cultural centers, schools, and community-based clubs can provide greater connections to and supports for LGBTQIA2S+ youth experiencing homelessness. This approach centers community actors which LGBTQIA2S+ youth trust and can increase an organization's standing in the community, deepens relationships, and supports prevention strategies.
- **Utilize Marketing Strategies:** Developing products and promotional materials that plainly indicate an organization is supportive and affirming of the LGBTQIA2S+ community is a way to increase engagement and the use of supports and services by LGBTQIA2S+ youth. Inclusivity and pride stickers in hygiene packs, outreach workers wearing pronoun pins, participation in local pride parades, and booths at pride events can build visibility and signal that an organization is affirming and supportive. Outreach materials outlining services should explicitly reference LGBTQIA2S+-specific or inclusive services that are offered.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS

- **Introduce Yourself Fully:** During introductions, organization staff should model using name and pronouns. As an example: *"Hello, my name is [insert] and I use [she/her, he/him, they/them or other] pronouns."* This opens the door for young people to self-identify and is a strong indicator that an organization and its team are affirming.
- **Avoid Assumptions:** Assumptions about sexual orientation, gender identity, and physical characteristics can be harmful and contribute to LGBTQIA2S+ youth feeling distress, shame, erasure, re-traumatization, and/or gender dysphoria. Staff should be trained in ways to use gender inclusive terminologies such as folx, partner, or parents, rather than gender specific terms such as mothers, husbands, etc., identify their own pronouns as noted above, and create opportunities for youth and young adults to identify themselves. Opportunities for self-identification should be clearly voluntary as some young people do not openly share their identity and may not name their connection to LGBTQIA2S+ community in certain environments.
- **Highlight Unique Services:** When providing information on available services, organizations should explicitly include any LGBTQIA2S+-specific services and make sure those services descriptors include LGBTQIA2S+ terminology. As noted above, these unique services should also be clearly identified in organizational outreach materials. Organizational outreach and orientation materials should state that the organization is LGBTQIA2S+ friendly and include information on how the organization works to ensure LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adult safety.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS (cont.)

- **Take an Individualized Approach:** LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults may need different resources that affirm and celebrate their sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex traits, race, and other characteristics. Organizations should develop and ask questions to determine how services can fit the person rather than how the person fits the services and connect LGBTQIA2S+ youth to additional needed services through referrals.
- **Create Inclusive Intake Paperwork:** Organizations should use inclusive intake paperwork¹ with ample options to self-identify gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. Identification questions on paperwork should allow for multiple selections and the option not to answer. The option not to answer is best phrased as a legitimate preference (e.g., “I prefer not to answer”) rather than an oppositional action (e.g., “refuse to answer” or “decline to answer”). Inclusive paperwork asks for a person to designate their identifying information as the normative and does not add modifiers to questions and categories. Examples include Pronouns rather than Preferred Pronouns, Name rather than Nickname or Chosen Name. Some intake questions require legal identifying information. In these cases, specify to distinguish legal details, which may not align with a person’s identity. For example, Legal Name or Sex Assigned at Birth.
- **Prioritize Safety:** Safety for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults is critical. Compounding circumstances, such as risk of being subjected to violence, discrimination, and mental health challenges, can all make LGBTQIA2S+ youth more vulnerable than their non-LGBTQIA2S+ peers. Below are several ways to help ensure LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults achieve safety with ways to help highlight that an organization is a safe place.
 - Keep information confidential. Confidentiality is not only required under the [Runaway and Homeless Youth Act \(RHYA\)](#) and [RHY Final Rule](#), but essential for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adult safety. Young peoples’ information is protected, and should not be shared unless informed, written consent is obtained before sharing. This includes gender identity, sex assigned at birth, pronouns, names used outside of legal documentation, and other information that could “out” a young person as LGBTQIA2S+ without their consent. Understand that the answers surrounding sexual orientation/gender identity/gender expression may change based on whether a parent/caregiver/family member is present, as well as the setting and comfort level with staff. This makes following the lead of the young person even more important. Additionally, gender and sexual orientation can be described as fluid and may change as a young person sees fit.



¹ [Example of inclusive intake guidance](#) (True Colors United)

ENGAGEMENT PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS (cont.)

- Share information about organizational nondiscrimination policies, ways the organization is creating a safe/comfortable environment, its commitment to equity, and/or other relevant values. This practice should be implemented across the program with all youth and young adults. If nondiscrimination policies and procedures do not include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, they should be expanded to do so as required under RHY regulations².
- Offer opportunities for transgender, intersex, non-binary, and gender expansive youth and young adults to discuss their feelings of comfort/safety surrounding sleeping arrangements, restrooms, etc., and identify specific needs. If living spaces are sex/gender segregated, transgender and intersex youth should be placed according to their gender identity unless they express a different preference. Organizations can explore providing additional living options for non-binary and gender expansive youth and young adults such as single bedrooms and bathrooms. If this is not possible, allow opportunities for these youth to discuss their feelings of comfort/safety surrounding sleeping and restroom arrangements, and for them to select where they would feel safest sleeping and using the restroom.
- Provide opportunities for open communication with youth who do not identify as LGBTQIA2S+ to create space for building rapport and ensuring the safety and security of all youth.
- When giving youth and young adults a tour of the space, consider if there is another young person with similar identities/experiences who could help them get acclimated.
- Make sure to create space for young people to ask questions and emphasize the importance of their thoughts, opinions, and needs.
- **Ask the Right Questions:** Consider ways of screening³ for sexual or domestic violence and human trafficking that does not assume heteronormativity. Key assumptions to avoid include *Trafficking only happens to women/girls, traffickers are always men, domestic violence can only happen to a woman by a man, and men cannot be victims of sexual violence by women.*



² 45 CFR (g) part 80§ 1351.20 (Federal Register)

³ [Screening and Assessments](#) (National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth & Families)

SERVICE DELIVERY CONSIDERATIONS

- **Consistently Affirm Youth and Young Adult's Identity:** Youth and young adults have a right to review their files at any time. At times, files may require that a youth and young adult's legal name and sex assigned at birth be documented. This should be kept confidential and all other references to the person in documentation should use the youth and young adult's identified name and pronouns.
- **Utilize a Culturally Responsive Approach and Resources:** In-house resources that are culturally responsive, acknowledging the importance of cultural backgrounds and experiences, are essential. When making partnerships and/or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) for additional resources, engage LGBTQIA2S+ community partners and seek LGBTQIA2S+-tailored supports that offer quality trauma-informed gender and sexuality affirming services and healthcare. Services and resources should:
 - Create a culture of authentic connection and care.
 - Include services specifically for LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults (i.e., support groups, activities, etc.).
 - Ensure that spaces reflect the diversity of youth and young adults served, for example by displaying pride and progress flags or encouraging staff from different departments to display safe space stickers on their office door or windows. Make sure the physical environment is LGBTQIA2S+ friendly.
 - Maintain gender inclusive sleeping arrangements and restrooms with visible signage, and create single bedrooms and single, gender-neutral bathrooms when possible.
 - Hire and engage LGBTQIA2S+ staff and ensure other supporters such as volunteers and mentors also reflect the population accessing services and consider identity intersectionality.
 - Ensure the retention of staff members through effective policies and a flexible and supportive work environment.
 - Require all organizational employees to receive cultural competency training including for working with LGBTQIA2S+ youth and those with intersectional identities.
- **Be Transparent:** Becoming an organization that is LGBTQIA2S+ supportive and affirming does not happen overnight. Organizations should be wary of making commitments to young people that cannot be fulfilled. This could jeopardize their safety and well-being as well as the organization's reputation. It is better to start small, for example by having an LGBTQIA2S+ person on staff that a young person can talk to, than to progress too quickly and potentially cause harm.

AFTERCARE CONSIDERATIONS

- **Offer Connections to LGBTQIA2S+ Supports:** Be intentional about connecting youth and young adults with formal and informal LGBTQIA2S+ supports and resources in the community (and broader as needed). A list of specifically LGBTQIA2S+ friendly partners and supports is a beneficial tool to have available and on display.
- **Create an Individualized Aftercare Plan:** Include aftercare goals that are responsive to the individual youth and young adult's needs, goals, culture, etc. This may include specific sexual health information as well as information about transition related healthcare, finding inclusive employment, engaging with an LGBTQIA2S+ community of support, participating in family therapy to assist a parent in understanding and supporting an LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults, etc.



KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION/TEAM

Here are some helpful questions for organizations to use as they work to support and affirm LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults:

- What are we doing to be a safe, supportive, and affirming LGBTQIA2S+ organization for the youth and young adults we interact with as well as LGBTQIA2S+ staff on a scale from 1–10 (10 being that we have put policies, resources, and best practices in place and continue to evaluate progress toward our mission, adjusting when needed)?
- Does how we see ourselves as an organization match how young people see us? What steps are we taking to receive youth and young adult feedback to support this perspective?
- What community partners are we engaging with that are LGBTQIA2S+ friendly? Do we have evidence they are affirming? What gaps exist in these external resources? What key organizations or providers are not present (e.g., mentoring, educational or career readiness organizations, food banks, religious or spiritual centers, or medical providers)?
- How closely does the diversity of staff match the diversity of youth and young adults that are being served by the organization? How does this impact the program or organization?
- What would an ideal environment look like that embraces the gifts, culture, identities, and experiences that each person brings to the table? What tools, trainings, and conversations can be put in place to make that possible?
- How do we hold ourselves and our leadership accountable for creating a supportive and affirming organization?



RESOURCES

- [RHYTTAC eLearning](#) (Use the search terms: “LGBTQIA2S+ Staff Trainings”)
- [Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America](#) (Chapin Hall)
- [Incidence and Vulnerability of LGBTQ Homeless Youth](#) (National Alliance to End Homelessness)
- [National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth](#) (Multiple Partners)
- [RHY Grantee Foundational Resources](#) (RHYTTAC)
- [Staff Retention Information Sheet Series](#) (RHYTTAC)
- [Inclusion Toolkit](#) (True Colors United)
- [Inclusive Intake Form Template](#) (True Colors United)
- [Sample Memorandum of Understanding](#) (RHYTTAC)
- [Screening and Assessments](#) (National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth & Families)



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