



## **Testimony for Joint Legislative Hearing of the 2014-15 Human Services Budget**

### **From the Empire State Pride Agenda**

Prepared by Jonathan Lang, Director of Government Projects and Community Development

As New York's statewide LGBT civil rights and advocacy organization, the Empire State Pride Agenda is deeply committed to achieving equality and justice for all New Yorkers. Our mission is to win equality and justice for LGBT New Yorkers and our families. We recognize that while significant cultural, legal and governmental advances have led to greater equality for LGBT New Yorkers, we and our families remain highly vulnerable without the vast majority of rights and protections that most New Yorkers take for granted.

#### **Facts on LGBT Runaway & Homeless Youth**

Even though it is difficult to determine just how many runaway and homeless youth are present in New York State or New York City, most folks have accepted the findings from the 2008 report from the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services that states there are approximately 3,800 unaccompanied, young people on the streets on any given night. Determining how many of these young people identify as LGBT is even more difficult even though we know that homelessness disproportionately impacts LGBT youth. Most estimates range from an alarming 15% to an eye-popping 40%.

LGBT youth are also becoming homeless at younger ages than heterosexual youth. The Empire State Coalition report noted that LGB youth became homeless at an average age of 14 and four months, and that transgender youth becomes homeless at an average of 13 and five months. As LGBT youth people come at younger ages, they are also experiencing family rejection and social discrimination at younger ages.

LGBT people of color continue to be the most affected by homelessness. An astounding 44% of the LGB youth identified as black and 26% identified as Hispanic. Of the transgender youth, 62% identified as black and 20% as Hispanic.

### **Family and LGBT Runaway & Homeless Youth**

Being homeless on the streets of New York City is already a terrifying experience, and LGBT runaway and homeless youth face additional challenges just for being who they are. Family conflict continues to be the primary reason for why many LGBT young people become homeless. We must realize that traditional approaches to reuniting the young person to their family simply do not work. In fact, reuniting the young person with his or her family may actually be the worst way to stabilize their living condition because many LGBT runaway and homeless youth have suffered from physical or emotional abuse by their families, including sexual assault and attempted murder. We must also recognize that family rejection is a key factor to having young people report higher rates of attempted suicide, depression, use of illegal drugs and unprotected sex, but also recognize that alternate methods and alternate family structures must be deployed and explored.

Schools are another traditional support system that has historically failed LGBT young people. Schools continue to be hotbeds for bias-based harassment and discrimination. Even though the passage of laws like the Dignity for All Students Act and Respect for All Students Act have helped provide school districts with the tools necessary to create safe and inclusive environments, LGBT students still face incredibly high rates of physical and verbal abuse, which can be directly linked to high rates of depressive disorders and truancy. Also, many school districts are focusing on meeting their requirements for the Common Core curricula. The State Education Department needs to do a better job of providing guidance to schools districts that want to do the right thing but have little time or resources and fail to see the connection between school achievement and school environment.

### **Schools and Runaway & Homeless Youth**

In many cases, the shelter system has offered no reprieve either. There are already too few shelter beds in New York City. For a population of almost 4,000 to have access to only 250 beds is unacceptable for a city as robust and resourceful as New York City. But increasing the number of shelter beds is not enough. We must work to create more safe spaces within the shelter bed system for LGBT runaway and homeless youth. Even though there have been great strides made to increase awareness and cultural competency of LGBT issues, many LGBT young people still face significant levels of stigma and discrimination. Organizations like the Ali Forney Center and others continue to struggle with wait lists that go into the hundreds because LGBT young people would rather brave the arctic chill than access some of the mainstream providers. Many young people have reported being victimized and brutalized,

and with shelter providers turning a blind eye to the sometimes-horrific conditions that LGBT young people are forced to endure if they want to sleep with a roof over their head.

All of these factors contribute to LGBT runaway and homeless youth facing disproportionately high levels of attempted suicide, serious depression, use of illegal drugs, and engagement in unprotected sex. In order to have a meaningful impact on the health and wellbeing of LGBT runaway and homeless youth, we must take a comprehensive approach to their needs, which must include an action plan that incorporates their LGBT identity. We can no longer afford to ignore the fact that LGBT young people are far more likely to be homeless than heterosexual young people, and yet there are too-few resources that understand and support them for who they are. What is more likely to occur is that a shelter provider will ask a young people to hide who they truly are, which will only lead to a disastrous long-term outcome. Being forced to choose between who you are and where you can live is not a choice at all.

#### **Funding and LGBT Runaway & Homeless Youth**

First and foremost, **New York State must restore funding for homeless beds for runaway and homeless youth to the \$4 million level.** New York State slashed funding for shelter beds by almost 50% three years ago and the already-strained system never recovered. We must do more to create safe and inclusive spaces for these young people, and ensuring that they do not need to resort to methods that place their lives in jeopardy is only the beginning to help them achieve their full potential.

Last year in the Enacted Budget for 2013-2014, the state Legislature was able to restore at least \$200,000 in funding for runaway and homeless youth. By all reports both the national economy and the state economy have begun to rebound. Surely we can at least match last year's effort if not exceed it.

#### **State Agencies and Runaway & Homeless Youth**

As part of addressing the root issues that cause homelessness, New York State must develop a stronger, more holistic plan of action that incorporates mental health, substance abuse, and trauma services as part of primary health care services using strong client-centered case management services, with strict adherence to confidentiality rules. The Office of Mental Health and the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Services must build stronger linkages with the Office of Children and Family Services to create a multi-pronged approach that crosscuts state agencies. Runaway and homeless youth providers must also be trained to identify symptoms of mental health, substance abuse, and trauma and address these issues directly or by way of referrals to appropriate specialists.

Furthermore, the Empire State Pride Agenda has worked closely with the Governor's Office and the Department of Labor to examine existing streams of funding and determine if there were any opportunities to support LGBT runaway and homeless youth. Working in collaboration, three LGBT youth providers submitted a joint proposal and were successful in receiving funding that would not only provide housing support, but would also connect these young people to education and employment opportunities. This is a great example of how collaboration and resource-sharing can produce the kind of support and funding needed to tackle these issues. We certainly hope that we will find a partner in the state Legislature to continue this work.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss the needs of LGBT runaway and homeless youth and I look forward to working with you in the days and weeks to come through the budget session.