



**Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning
(LGBTQ) Youth in Foster Care
*National Foster Youth Advisory Council***

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council believe that all young people in foster care are entitled to an equal array of supports, resources, and opportunities that address their specific needs. Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) are at heightened risk for experiencing a number of negative outcomes. As a result, NFYAC members stress that LGBTQ youth must have access to:

- Compassionate, supportive, and non-judgmental social workers, foster parents, and service providers who are willing to build upon their strengths and advocate on their behalf;
- Information, resources and services that meet their individual needs and support healthy decision-making;
- A safe, stable, and affirming home where they feel welcomed and cared for;
- Safe homes, safe schools, and safe communities where they are accepted, nurtured, loved and valued; and
- Connections with caring and non-judgmental adults who will support their healthy development and well-being.

Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council convened in May of 2006 to address the growing challenges facing LGBTQ youth in care with regards to the widespread lack of support, resources, and services available these vulnerable youth. NFYAC members were asked to share their own experiences as well as those of their peers. They also heard about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in care who participated in a series of Regional Listening Forums that CWLA and its programmatic partner Lambda Legal convened throughout the country. NFYAC Members read several quotes from LGBTQ youth in care who participated in these forums such as, "When I was in foster care, all my foster mom would do is taunt me," "My foster family took away my clothes, called me a 'dyke' and tried to remake me," and "I got jumped by a bunch of guys in my group home, and when I told the Director he said, 'Well, if you weren't a faggot they wouldn't beat you up.' It's not fair.

Members were then asked to provide recommendations for supporting LGBTQ youth in care.

Social acceptance and support are critical as young people develop a sense of identity and self worth. Young people in foster care already face an array of stigmas and labels because of their involvement with the child welfare system. LGBTQ youth in care are especially vulnerable to scrutiny because of the prejudice, ignorance and lack of acceptance they encounter on a regular basis. Members of NFYAC have identified a variety of ways to support LGBTQ youth and believe that these recommendations, if embraced by the child welfare community, have the potential to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth while they are in care.

NFYAC's Recommendations for Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

Create a "center" in every city that supports LGBTQ foster youth.

LGBTQ youth in care need to know where they can go to get information and resources that they need with no questions asked. A number of cities across the country have created local, community-based resource centers. Several LGBTQ youth centers exist throughout the country, including the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, MI; the Attic in Philadelphia, PA; the Jacksonville Sexual Minority Youth Network (JASMYN) in Jacksonville, FL; and Rainbow Alley in Denver, CO. Many LGBT community centers also sponsor programs and services specifically designed for youth. *Local centers are important to provide ongoing support services to LGBTQ youth.*

Create mandatory training for social workers and foster parents on supporting LGBTQ foster youth.

Social workers and foster parents need mandatory training about the strengths, needs and issues facing LGBTQ foster youth. The training should also include strategies for supporting youth in dealing with issues as well as understanding sexual orientation and gender identity in the broader context of human sexuality. Social workers and foster parents need to understand how their own values and beliefs about sexuality impact LGBTQ youth. When they need additional help with answering questions or dealing with situations that make them uncomfortable, they should have access to individuals or organizations that can provide assistance. NFYAC members recounted numerous inappropriate comments made by staff: "You're not gay, you're just bored" or "You're just going through a phase" or "You just need to get a hobby." Foster parents and social workers must also be open to receiving training and education as well as changing their behavior, when necessary. *Creating mandatory training sessions for those who work with youth is essential to*

creating a climate of safety, affirmation and acceptance for all youth in foster care.

Create a culture of acceptance and affirmation among young people involved with the foster care system.

At present, very limited attention is given to promoting tolerance and an understanding of differences among youth in care. Young people in care have limited exposure to the world outside of the child welfare system and are not taught about the many dimensions of culture. NFYAC members suggest that information and education about youth who identify as LGBTQ could go a long way to promote understanding and social acceptance among their peers. *Young people in foster care should have access to information and resources that will promote a broad understanding of culture as well as support the development of their own cultural identity.*

Support LGBTQ youth in the development of healthy, age-appropriate peer relationships and behaviors.

Many heterosexual youth in care are guided by the adults who work with them in developing an understanding of healthy relationships among their peers and social networks. This often includes dating and developing an understanding of age-appropriate sexual expression such as hand-holding and kissing. The same is often not true for LGBTQ youth, who are rarely encouraged to date or develop healthy relationships with peers. And the consequences for behaviors such as hand-holding and kissing, which are typically viewed as age-appropriate for heterosexual youth, are often more severe for LGBTQ youth, who are oftentimes labeled as sexually aggressive or sexual offenders. This double standard often leads LGBTQ youth to become involved with the juvenile justice system, further eroding the likelihood that they will be able to achieve positive academic and professional outcomes. *All young people in care, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, should be supported in developing an understanding of healthy, age-appropriate relationships and behaviors.*

Empower young people to understand the impact of the media in their lives.

The media plays a significant role in helping society to better understand issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as perpetuating negative stereotypes or misinformation about them. Youth in foster care should have opportunities to discuss the ways in which the media influences their lives so that they can acknowledge and recognize its power. In doing so, young people are empowered to dismantle negative stereotypes and equipped with knowledge needed to make informed choices. *Young people in foster care must be empowered to question the role of the media in perpetuating homophobia in our society.*

Understand that sexual orientation and gender identity do not solely define one's identity.

Sexual orientation and gender identity represent just one dimension of individual identity. Like all young people, LGBTQ youth need a broad range of supports from the adults who work with and care for them. They need support with regard to their education, the development of social skills and a peer networks, their professional and vocational aspirations, competent health care, their spiritual development, etc. NFYAC members emphasize the importance of getting to know the whole person.

Be a powerful advocate by understanding the broader context of the LGBTQ debate.

NFYAC members recognize that the challenges experienced by LGBTQ youth in foster care reflect the ongoing debates about same sex marriage and parenting by gays and lesbians that are currently taking place in our country. LGBTQ youth, adults and others who are interested in getting involved should get informed and can get connected with a variety of civil rights activities and organizations, such as Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the National Youth Advocacy Coalition.

Members of NFYAC are committed to bringing about much needed changes in the way that people act when it comes to the treatment of LGBTQ youth in foster care. By confronting homophobia and all of the other ISM's, our efforts to promote equality, acceptance and tolerance become part of the collective movement to safeguard our civil rights.

Young people in foster care are invested in supporting their LGBTQ peers and have the power to make a difference.