

Provider Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Delaware

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Abstract

Objective: This article details the results of focus groups with providers who work with LGBTQ+ youth experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness in Delaware. **Methods:** Researchers interviewed 16 service providers in four focus groups held between May 24, 2023 and June 5, 2023. Providers included housing support specialists, social workers, community health workers, school counselors, mental health care providers, and other community-service-based practitioners. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, and the authors utilized inductive coding to identify emerging themes. **Results:** Throughout Delaware, there are limited housing and public health supports in place for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Even when services are available, LGBTQ+ young people may have difficulty accessing them due to age restrictions, shelter segregation by sex or gender, or safety concerns. Providers working with this population face challenges including limited funding and staff, and a lack of specialized training. Changes at the local and state level—including increased funding, enhanced access to specialized training, and greater inclusivity on administrative forms—are important first steps to ensuring providers can adequately provide services to LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. **Conclusions:** LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience homelessness than their cisgender and heterosexual peers and yet face greater barriers to housing services throughout Delaware. The unique needs of this population necessitate specialized services and programs to ensure all young people have access to basic needs such as housing. **Policy Implications:** The provider perspectives in this paper offer a firsthand account of the challenges of serving this population and opportunities for improvement in policy creation and program administration.

Introduction

More than one in four lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+) youth report experiencing housing instability or homelessness at some point in their lives.¹ LGBTQ+ youth are not only more likely to experience homelessness^{2,3} than their straight or cisgender peers, they are also at a greater risk of mistreatment and exploitation while they are

unhoused.⁴ Due to age constraints, young people under 18 experiencing homelessness may not qualify for certain services for adults, creating a barrier to services. Moreover, those in the LGBTQ+ community may feel unsafe or unwelcome at group shelters or those separated by sex or gender. Therefore, the unique housing and administrative needs of this population necessitate specialized services on a state and national level.

Delaware currently has several methods in place to quantify homelessness throughout the state. These include the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, which counts the number of unhoused individuals on a single night in January,⁵ and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which tracks the number of students in the state experiencing homelessness during each school year.⁶ However, it is unclear how accurate these methods are in capturing the true incidence of homelessness—let alone youth homelessness—in the state, and there is limited data on unhoused LGBTQ+ youth specifically. Thus, additional work is necessary to understand the population characteristics of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness and their needs.

To this end, previous research at the University of Delaware's Center for Community Research and Service laid out a plan for a multi-step process to understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Delaware.⁷ The research team first conducted a literature review of existing survey work around LGBTQ+ homelessness and the needs of the population. Then, the team conducted focus groups with service providers and individuals with lived experiences of being unhoused to assess how best to survey the number and needs of the unhoused youth population. This led to the creation of a survey and methodology to enumerate youth experiencing homelessness in Delaware. When viewed together, the data gathered in the outlined steps will provide a more comprehensive picture of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Delaware, enabling policymakers and program administrators to better meet the needs of this population. This paper explores key findings from the provider focus groups.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore participants' experiences and perspectives related to LGBTQ+ unhoused youth. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide rich, detailed, and complex accounts of qualitative data.⁸

Methodology & Data Collection

The research team utilized a purposive sampling method to identify Delaware-based service providers with expertise, experience, or relevant knowledge in housing support and services tailored to LGBTQ+ youth. Providers were identified by word-of-mouth recommendations from community and research partners, snowball sampling (asking identified participants to recommend others), and through strategic recruitment strategies (study investigators attended local trainings and workshops during the spring of 2023 to recruit interested youth service providers). A total of 50 service providers in Delaware were invited to participate in focus groups, including housing support specialists, social workers, community health workers, school counselors, mental health care providers, and other community-service-based practitioners. In total, 16 providers participated across four focus groups between May 24, 2023 and June 5, 2023.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Focus groups lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio and video recorded with participants' consent. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions (table 1) designed to elicit in-depth narratives and reflections on participants' experiences with LGBTQ+ unhoused youth and needs. Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration and clarify responses.

Table 1. Interview Guide Questions for LGBTQ+ and Unhoused Youth Service Providers

1. How does your organization come in contact with LGBTQ+ youth?
2. What specialized services for LGBTQ+ youth do you provide?
2a. How are staff trained specifically to work with this population?
3. In your opinion, what are barriers LGBTQ+ youth face when accessing housing and other forms of support?
3a. What are barriers to making sure unhoused LGBTQ+ youth know your services are available?
4. When youth do not access housing supports where do they go?
5. How does your organization define experiences of homelessness?
6. As a provider or community leader, what are major gaps that you see in services provided to unhoused LGBTQ+ youth in your local areas?
6a. What are major gaps broadly in Delaware?
6b. Rural/ suburban/ urban (geography)
7. What would your organization need to better reach and serve LGBTQ+ youth?
8. What do you think is most important to know about the LGBTQ+ youth that you seek to serve?
9. Is there anything today that you wanted to discuss that we did not get a chance to?
10. Who else should we be talking with about this?

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw at any time, and the secure handling of their data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using Otter.AI Pro and checked by members of the study team for consistency. Initial thematic analysis of the focus groups involved (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, and (5) defining and naming themes.⁸ Data were coded using Dedoose version 9.0.90. Coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being pre-determined.

Authors one and two performed the initial coding and analysis of the focus group transcripts. The last author reviewed identified codes and refined emerging themes, ensuring rigor and intercoder reliability.

Results

Ten overarching themes were identified from service provider focus groups, including: hiding in plain sight; familial, cultural and community factors; safety concerns, risks, and consequences; coming into contact with unaccompanied youth; services, referrals, and available resources; shuffling youth between services; barriers to youth accessing housing and social supports; barriers to service providers; administrative barriers and data needs; and reducing barriers.

Hiding in Plain Sight

Youth experiencing homelessness are a hidden population. According to providers, unaccompanied youth often “couch surf” or reside with friends and family versus staying out in the open. When such arrangements fall through or are unavailable, young people under the age of 18 are often not eligible for adult services such as hotel vouchers due to their age. As a result, when they do not have access to temporary housing with family or friends, they will often stay in cars, unoccupied buildings, wooded areas, parks, or other public places.

Familial, Cultural, and Community Factors

For some LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, familial circumstances such as parental job loss have led to them being unhoused. Others become unhoused when their sexual orientation or gender identity is incompatible with their current living situation. Providers noted that many LGBTQ+ youth experience familial, cultural, or community stigma related to their identity. Cultural factors, including Black spiritualism, Latino machismo, and Christian beliefs, can all contribute to perceived or actual stigma or conflict for LGBTQ+ youth. Individuals living in these environments who do not conform to a heteronormative sexual or gender identity may be forced to leave home or elect to leave because of fear of rejection or stigmatization.

Safety Concerns, Risks, and Consequences

Providers noted that unaccompanied youth of all sexual and gender identities experience extreme threats to their safety and well-being including violence, participation in risky behaviors, and increased prevalence of mental health issues. LGBTQ+ youth specifically were noted as being at an increased risk of sexual violence or trafficking when compared to their straight, cisgender peers. Unhoused youth who reside outside are also at risk of exposure to the elements and extreme weather. These negative experiences can have far-reaching consequences; providers have seen unhoused youth experience early incarceration and introduction to the criminal justice system.

Coming into Contact with Unaccompanied Youth

Service providers revealed a variety of ways in which they encounter unaccompanied youth. Some young people reach out to services in an official capacity, by walking into housing support or social welfare offices, contacting school counselors, or by accessing informational resources online or through the state library system. Others learn about available services through their social network by word of mouth, social media, or internet forums. Outreach is another

important component to contacting unaccompanied youth, and service providers may encounter this population by meeting them where they are staying, including outdoors or in public places.

Services, Referrals, and Available Resources

Teachers, school counselors, mental health providers or therapists, and outreach professionals all serve as conduits to specialized services. Often, providers say, housing support services and LGBTQ+ support groups work together to ensure youth have access to services. PFLAG, Charlie Health, the Gay-Straight Alliance, 21st Century Learning Community Center programs, and the Community Partner Support Unit (CPSU) were all mentioned as groups that can help young people connect to the services they need.

Specific to Delaware, providers noted that unaccompanied youth are often referred to the “Life Lines” program at West End Neighborhood House. Because there are limited specialized providers in the state, some youths are also referred to external organizations, such as the Attic Youth Center or Mazzoni Center, both in Philadelphia.

Shuffling Youth Between Services

Because there are limited LGBTQ+-specific housing resources in Delaware, when service providers do not have the resources to assist LGBTQ+ youth, they often contact an organization that may be more familiar with resources such as one of the support organizations listed above. The support organization is then tasked with finding accommodations, services, and resources that match the needs of the youth. This can result in unhoused youth being shuffled among multiple services in order to find one or several that can meet their needs.

Providers noted that often, when the available services in Delaware are unable to meet the needs of unhoused youth, alternative measures can be employed. These may include placing youth with friends or family or transporting them to larger, more specialized organizations in neighboring cities or states.

Barriers to Youth Accessing Housing and Social Supports

While there are many ways in which unaccompanied youth come into contact with housing services, providers also discussed the significant barriers many youths encounter that may prevent them from accessing or receiving services. Providers stated that age was a substantial barrier, as unaccompanied minors often need parental consent to access services like shelters and motel vouchers. Limited public transportation in Delaware poses challenges for young people who do not have access to a vehicle, particularly for those in the state’s more rural areas. Safety concerns may hinder an individual’s willingness to stay in shelters or other communal housing, and for youth who identify as transgender or nonbinary, gender-segregated accommodations in shelters pose additional risks. There are a limited number of LGBTQ+ specific housing and mental health providers throughout the state, and religious or moral agendas may prevent certain shelters or groups from offering services specifically catering to the LGBTQ+ community. Even when services are readily available, youth who lack medical insurance or Medicaid may be unable to access them.

Barriers to Service Providers

The restrictions at temporary shelters, which are often segregated by sex (male or female) or group (families or individuals) make it challenging to place unaccompanied youth, especially those who may identify as trans or nonbinary. Although shelters receiving federal funding are obligated to follow equal access rules, many still struggle to accommodate all identities due to these restrictions. Even when certain services are available to teens and young adults, they may not meet the needs of this population. For instance, those over 18 may be eligible for services such as hotel or motel vouchers, but some of these organizations will not rent to teens or young adults.

Staffing and funding constraints are another major barrier to adequately serving this population, as many shelters and service providers do not have staff trained to specifically work with LGBTQ+ youth and lack the funding to provide such training. In schools, LGBTQ+ social support groups, such as the Gay Straight Alliance, are often only available in high schools, making it challenging for younger students to access the peer support and resources offered by these groups. Additionally, religious agendas and cultural stigmas may hinder schools and community organizations from adequately providing services to LGBTQ+ individuals.

Administrative Barriers and Data Needs

Service providers often face administrative barriers when attempting to assist unaccompanied youth. Providers consistently cited the age of eligibility for services as a substantial barrier for those who leave home as minors. Administrative forms that use sex at birth rather than gender identity may deter transgender or nonbinary youth from seeking services. Additionally, some organizations' narrow definitions of homelessness that exclude temporary accommodations such as couch surfing or staying with friends may prevent some young people from being eligible for services.

Reducing Barriers

Service providers discussed several ways to make access to services and the ability to provide services easier. Adding pronoun and gender identity questions on administrative forms and allowing respondents space to identify their gender correctly can increase inclusivity in service provision. Schools may reduce barriers by introducing more LGBTQ+ resources in elementary and middle schools, creating more peer support programs, and integrating LGBTQ+ supports into the McKinney-Vento Act. On the state level, focus group participants noted the importance of ensuring providers have appropriate training to work with LGBTQ+ youth populations, increasing funding for housing supports, and advocating for early emancipation to ensure minors can access certain housing services.

Discussion

LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness are a unique population that require intentional action to create inclusive policies and safe, welcoming spaces. Housing is a basic need for all people, and LGBTQ+ youth are at an increased risk of this need not being met. By interviewing individuals who provide services to this population, this research offers a unique perspective on the programmatic and policy-related needs of LGBTQ+ unhoused youth population in Delaware.

Throughout the focus groups, service providers emphasized the barriers facing unhoused LGBTQ+ youth. They noted the difficulty in reaching youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness and the dearth of services for unhoused LGBTQ+ youth in Delaware. Providers also discussed the challenges they face in serving these youths, including limited funding and staff, administrative restrictions, and a lack of specialized training.

Addressing LGBTQ+ youth homelessness requires a multi-pronged approach. Inclusivity on administrative forms is an important first step, as having the correct pronouns and gender identity on forms can help young people access the appropriate services. Since the school system is a frequent point of contact for young people at risk for homelessness, providers suggested increasing support programs in schools and integrating LGBTQ+ supports into the McKinney-Vento Act. Statewide, taking steps to ensure minors have access to services is key. To this end, providers discussed access to early emancipation to ensure minors can access adult housing services when appropriate, increasing funding for housing support programs, and expanding specialized training opportunities for providers.

Public Health Implications

Unhoused young people—particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+—are a group that often experiences gaps in services due to the limited availability of specialized housing and public health programs in Delaware. Speaking with service providers who have firsthand experience working with this population creates a knowledge base regarding current services available and opportunities for improvement in service provision. Future research will focus on the analysis of the lived experience focus groups. In these, researchers spoke with members of the LGBTQ+ community who have experienced or been at risk of experiencing youth homelessness. Together, the integration of the lived experience and provider perspectives creates a comprehensive dataset that can be used to better serve the needs of this population.

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