

# CREATING A CULTURE OF RESPECT



## Homeless Service Provider Tips for Trans-Inclusivity



People who are transgender face economic instability, housing instability and discrimination at every turn. Transgender people of color experience anti-transgender bias in addition to widespread racism, compounding the prejudice they face. Anti-transgender discrimination leads to increased homelessness. About one in five (19%) transgender people in the U.S. experience homelessness at some point in their lives because of their gender expression and/or identity. This is a much higher figure than the frequency of homelessness in the U.S as a whole — 1%.<sup>i</sup>

### Challenges transgender people face that often lead to increased homelessness:

- rejection from family and/or friends
- chronic unemployment due to discrimination
- violence by family, partner or others
- denial of services, harassment, and/or mistreatment by staff and/or clients at shelters, drug treatment facilities & other agencies
- discrimination by social services
- discrimination and harassment in school
- abusive treatment by law enforcement

### WHAT DOES “TRANSGENDER” AND “GENDER NON-CONFORMING” MEAN?

- ⇒ “**Transgender**” is a general term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex/gender they were assigned at birth.
- ⇒ “**Gender Non-Conforming**” refers to people who do not follow the dominant culture’s expectations or stereotypes about how they should look or act based on the female or male sex they were assigned at birth.
- ⇒ “**Transgender**” and “**Gender Non-Conforming**” are umbrella terms that often encompass other terms such as transsexual, F2M (female to male), M2F (male to female), cross-dresser, gender queer, femme queen, A.G., Two Spirit, and many more.
- ⇒ “**Cisgender**” refers to people whose present gender identity matches the sex/gender they were assigned at birth. In short, cisgender means *not* transgender. This is a much preferred term to referring to people as “real” or “normal.” There is nothing unreal or abnormal about being transgender.

(for more definitions visit the Sylvia Rivera Law Project website— [www.srlp.org](http://www.srlp.org))

### TIPS FOR ONE-ON-ONE COMMUNICATION

- 1) Respect the chosen name and pronoun preferred by a transgender person.** If you don’t know, it is okay to ask politely. If you make a mistake, just correct yourself. If you need to know a person’s legal name (for intake forms, reporting, etc.), ask respectfully, explaining first why you need to know. Same goes for someone’s legal sex—ask respectfully, first explaining why you need to know.
- 2) Curb your curiosity.** We are all curious people, but it’s best to avoid intrusive questions for the sake of your curiosity. Would you ask a cisgender person that same question? If not, refer to trusted websites and books that can help to answer your questions.
- 3) Validate a person’s present gender.** Instead of asking, for example, “When you were a girl...,” you can ask “Before you transitioned...” Additionally, avoid using the terms “real” or “normal” to describe non-transgender people. This can be invalidating. Non-transgender or cisgender are preferred.
- 4) Assumptions that all transgender people have had or want surgeries or hormone therapy are false.** These medical services are expensive, and navigating the procedural channels to access these treatments is difficult. Additionally, not all transgender people want to modify their bodies in the same way — this does not diminish their gender identity.
- 5) Speak up and educate yourself,** recognize your past mistakes and continue to care about being a good ally to transgender and gender non-conforming people. Together, we can create a culture where everyone is respected.

## TIPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- 1) Review referral lists for trans-inclusivity.** Referring transgender/gender non-conforming clients to services where they may encounter discrimination or harassment can be upsetting for clients and providers. Referral lists should include notes about the services' ability and willingness to assist transgender clients.
- 2) Confidentiality** is crucial for all clients' sensitive and private information; transgender clients may face disrespect and even violence if 'outed.' A good rule of thumb is to always ask client first, i.e. "Can I talk to the house manager/residents on that floor/ other agencies/etc. about your being transgender?"
- 3) Zero tolerance for harassment.** All forms of harassment should be taken seriously and addressed immediately. All clients and staff should hold each other accountable to a strict non-harassment policies, and address harassment swiftly.
- 4) Respect for safety** is paramount for all clients. Ask where transgender and gender non-conforming clients feel safest for their bed/room assignment and shower/bathroom use. Do your best to accommodate their requests and address their concerns.
- 5) Non-discrimination policies** should include gender-identity and expression AND should be posted for staff and clients. Simple statements like "We respect transgender people" are useful, and can be posted anywhere and included on agency intake forms.
- 6) Adopt an "Ask First Policy."** When talking to transgender clients, other agencies or friends and family of trans clients, first ask how the client would like to be referred to (name/pronouns). For example: if a case manager is asked to reach out to a client's parents, the case manager should ask how the client wants to be referred to (name/pronouns) in this situation before making a call/writing a letter/etc.
- 7) Staff/Volunteer trainings** and orientation should include the agency's policies regarding gender identity, how to show respect for all clients, and issues that may arise for transgender and gender non-conforming clients and how those can be addressed.
- 8) Intake forms** should not require clients to choose "male" or "female." Sex/Gender should be asked with multiple choices and a blank to fill in, followed by a statement that lets transgender clients know they are welcome. This also lets cisgender clients know that the agency respects transgender people—setting a tone of respect.
- 9) Housing placements** should be based on gender-identity, not surgery. Medical procedures are income and access dependent. Placements can also be made by asking clients where they feel safest.
- 10) Acknowledge past mistakes.** This can be a difficult, but useful, step. Everyone makes mistakes, and we all grow and learn in order to better assist clients. Individuals and communities have long memories however, so regaining trust may be difficult. It is important to acknowledge mistakes and to show how the agency has changed.

## PROVIDER CHECKLIST<sup>ii</sup>

- ⇒ Have you reached out to local transgender communities and other agencies for guidance or training?
- ⇒ Have you reviewed your referral list to ensure that the agencies are welcoming to and respectful of the transgender residents you refer there?
- ⇒ Have you developed written policies covering issues of respect, confidentiality, housing placements, bathroom/shower policies, harassment and other topics for intake conversation?
- ⇒ Have you made any alterations to bathrooms and showers, including installing locks on doors and putting up curtains to increase the amount of privacy in your facility?
- ⇒ Have you changed your intake forms to ask "Gender: \_\_\_\_\_" followed by a statement that transgender people are respected at your shelter/agency?
- ⇒ Have you put up a sign in your lobby that indicates that transgender people are welcome in your shelter/agency?
- ⇒ Have you set up a training session for all staff, interns and volunteers? What about conversations or trainings for shelter residents?
- ⇒ Have you integrated a training segment into the training program for all new staff, including volunteers?

### BALTIMORE CITY ORDINANCE—02-453

*Baltimore City Ordinance 02-453, passed in 2002, prohibits discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations based on gender identity and expression. This ordinance covers all homeless shelters in Baltimore City, except for those that are religious institutions.*

*The ordinance covers a wide variety of gender expression and identity, and is not dependent on the person self-identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming.*

## REFERENCES:

<sup>i</sup> Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman & Mara Keisling (2011). *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

<sup>ii</sup> Mottet, Lisa & John Ohle (2003). *Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People*. New York: The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.



**Power Inside** is a human rights and harm reduction organization that serves women and girls who are survivors of gender-based violence and oppression. We serve women impacted by incarceration, street life and abuse. We offer direct services, advocacy, leadership development and public education to help women build self-sufficiency, heal from violence and avoid future criminal justice contact.

\*Contact Power Inside at [contact@powerinside.org](mailto:contact@powerinside.org) or call 410.889.8333 for more information. Power Inside is a program of Fusion Partnerships, Inc.