

**BEST PRACTICES REPORT**

# **Strengthening Linkages between Substance Abuse Providers and LGBT Community Resources**

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Substance abuse organizations in California are serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) clients, even though many organizations do not acknowledge client sexual orientation or gender identity, and many LGBT clients do not disclose their LGBT status. California-based substance abuse organizations are not necessarily conducting direct outreach specific to this population or implementing LGBT-inclusive services. According to a recent needs assessment, the majority of California substance abuse organizations have not conducted service enhancements intended to specifically benefit LGBT populations. For these reasons, LGBT clients often have difficulty fully accessing substance abuse prevention and treatment services.

In the Fall of 2007, LGBT-TRISTAR conducted a needs assessment of prevention, treatment, and recovery support service providers in California with the goal of improving the availability, access to, and quality of substance abuse-related services for LGBT individuals. One of the principal findings was the need to establish and strengthen linkages between Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) providers and LGBT community organizations and resources. The following report describes suggestions for designing and implementing LGBT-inclusive services, conducting outreach and marketing to the LGBT community, building effective partnerships with organizations that serve LGBT populations, building trusting relationships with LGBT community members, and utilizing LGBT resources and referrals. Strategies address the issues of providers located in areas with vibrant LGBT communities as well as those located in areas with limited or no visible LGBT community.

## Designing and Implementing LGBT-Inclusive Services

Before an organization markets its services to the LGBT community, it is helpful to begin by evaluating the organizational readiness to incorporate LGBT issues in program development and service delivery. Most substance abuse organizations design conventional programs and services for mainstream heterosexual-identified individuals and families. LGBT individuals are repeatedly turned away from these services, or do not seek services at all, because of the fear and/or reality that these services fail to meet their needs. Organizations can attempt to close these gaps by offering services that normalize LGBT experience rather than place it within a marginalized framework.

Many organizational challenges may need to be overcome, including reviewing and potentially revising

organizational philosophy, policies, and procedures; increasing staff cultural competency on LGBT issues; getting support from staff and board members; securing funding; and potentially making physical changes to the facility. Organizations may choose to develop or augment existing services to be more inclusive, or develop and implement LGBT-specific programming. Each organization needs to evaluate their local communities in order to develop methods for enhancing program participation and sustainability that are appropriate for the area.

## Staff Training, Revisions to Policies and Procedures, and Fostering a Welcoming Environment

Before moving forward on marketing an organization's services to the LGBT community, providers need to feel confident that their staff is sensitive and aware of LGBT client issues to ensure that LGBT clients do not have a potentially negative experience. It is helpful to begin by scheduling a free LGBT Cultural Competency training, available through LGBT-TRISTAR. These trainings increase staff understanding of appropriate language and behavior for addressing and working with the LGBT community, describe treatment strategies and service approaches for working with LGBT individuals, and help organizations identify steps they can take to improve services for LGBT populations. Trainings provide an excellent opportunity for facilitated discussion of LGBT issues among diverse members of the organization, and can be tailored to the specific needs of the training group.

Many organizations operate with policies and procedures that are not inclusive of LGBT experience—intake forms assume heterosexuality, for instance. It is important to update procedures and ensure that all staff are proficient with any changes in protocol. In addition to revising intake procedures, substance abuse providers are evaluating and revising urinalysis procedures, support group, counseling, and residential facility policies, and other activities to be inclusive and affirming of LGBT experience. LGBT-TRISTAR provides free technical assistance that can walk providers through the process of updating policies and procedures.

Another change to consider includes adopting a “zero-tolerance” policy for oppressive language and behaviors. Clients will listen for staff to send the unambiguous message that oppressive comments or jokes are not acceptable in your agency. Though many organizations have non-discrimination policies that apply to staff, volunteers, board members, and clients of the program, most do not include both sexual orientation and gender identity. Implementation and consequences for violation

of this policy also need to be clearly stated. Though some substance abuse organizations have unwritten policies and procedures that are carried out successfully, it is very important that all policies and procedures are documented in writing in order to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure sustainability through changes in the staff and board.

Other typical concerns of substance abuse organizations include assessing organizational readiness and updating policies and protocol to be inclusive of transgendered clients. In the State of California, providers are legally required to deliver services to clients based on their gender identity and expression, which is not dependent on the name and gender listed on their ID, their genital status, or hormone levels. In other words, you are legally required to provide services based on what is between a client's ears, not their legs.

Clearly, there may be certain challenges to be overcome in residential treatment settings and in gender-specific groups. The organization as a whole needs to develop a clear policy for serving transgendered individuals and all staff need to be educated on appropriate behavior and protocol. Strategies need to be in place for helping non-transgendered clients develop acceptance of fellow transgendered program participants without breaching confidentiality. Again, free training and technical assistance through LGBT-TRISTAR can be helpful in providing education about this underserved population, and for developing practical policies and procedures so that all clients can participate comfortably in a non-discriminatory environment.

Finally, providers can create a welcoming environment through the display of LGBT-inclusive visual cues in their facilities; developing a knowledgeable, respectful staff that comfortably and confidentially acknowledges client disclosures of LGBT status; and seeking out openly LGBT staff, board members, volunteers, and clients. In addition, providers can develop qualitative and quantitative methods for evaluating the effectiveness of their organization's LGBT-inclusive services, and utilize the data to continue to enhance services for this underserved population.

## **Marketing and Conducting Outreach in the LGBT Community**

An essential component to increasing the effectiveness of your organization's services for members of the LGBT community is to get the word out that you are welcoming to them. Before approaching your agency, prospective clients will look for cues in their communities.

They may search LGBT directories and publications for advertisements, or they may seek referrals from friends or LGBT agencies. Whether you are located in an area with a large, organized LGBT community or an area that is relatively isolated, there are a number of ways that you can have a visible presence in the LGBT community. If your organization is viewed as supportive of the LGBT community, it is more likely that members of the LGBT community will turn to you if they are in need of assistance.

In areas with an active LGBT community as well as areas where there is limited LGBT visibility, it is important to work collaboratively with whatever entity is considered important, visible, and familiar to the local LGBT population. Examples might include: local LGBT Centers, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Gay Straight Alliances (GSA), LGBT sports teams, performance theaters/spaces, and local colleges. Attendance at local LGBT events and community forums can provide opportunities for networking and information exchange. If available, local LGBT Centers are an excellent resource; in addition to hosting numerous events and support groups, they provide a wealth of information about organizations and community resources. If your organization can devote staff or volunteer time to conduct outreach at local LGBT events, such as staffing an information table at PRIDE or other community events, you show your organization's support of the LGBT community in a very visible, effective way.

Many colleges have an LGBT Resource Center where you can present information about your services. In areas where there is no large visible LGBT community, colleges are very useful resources because they often host LGBT events that provide golden opportunities for outreaching and networking, particularly among young people.

### **Building Effective Partnerships with Organizations that Serve LGBT Individuals**

In areas that do not have visible LGBT communities, it is important to develop collegial relationships with organizations that serve LGBT populations, including HIV/AIDS organizations, mental health providers, and medical clinics. Partnerships with these providers and organizations can provide resources for problem-solving on improving services for LGBT populations, and also create opportunities for collaboration. Possible collaborations include: trainings or presentations, events that raises awareness about substance abuse issues, and programmatic collaborations. Collaborative work can enhance opportunities to do effective and larger scale outreach campaigns. Building coalitions creates a strong, united front in the face of a local climate that is potentially hostile to LGBT concerns.

If your area has an organized LGBT community, these partnerships can enhance your ability to build trust with the LGBT community and work collaboratively with potential referral sources. If possible, make an investment of time with on-going, regular interaction, such as attendance at monthly meetings. As you develop long-term partnerships, the outcome may be that you do not have to wait for the next training or quarterly meeting to ask questions and problem solve with colleagues in the field.

### **Building Trusting Relationships with LGBT Community Members**

When conducting one-on-one outreach with members of the LGBT community, keep in mind the recovery field's strong value for non-judgmental service approaches. Be neighborly, respectful, welcoming, and comfortable. Pay attention to the language that potential clients use to describe themselves and mirror it when appropriate. Refrain from making assumptions about a client's sexual orientation or gender identity. Allow the person to self-identify and do not assume that they are "out" in every sphere of their lives. It is also important to keep any personal biases or assumptions in check about how and whether a client's LGBT status impacts their use patterns and potential for recovery. Remember to ask clients what they need rather than assume or tell them what they need.

A community member's sexual orientation and/or gender identity should be handled with the same care that you would handle other issues of confidentiality, such as mental health status, HIV status, race, religion, immigration status, and other sensitive information. A breach of confidentiality about LGBT status can result in harassment, multiple losses, and possible violence directed at that individual, so do not under any circumstances disclose their LGBT status to anyone.

Reliability and respect can go a long way. Have good follow-through by getting back to the individual if you have promised that you will. Comfortably acknowledge a community member's disclosure of LGBT status, ask about a same sex partner, and always use the appropriate name and pronoun for transgendered people, even if they are not within earshot.

### **Utilizing the Internet Effectively**

Do not underestimate the power of the Internet as an important tool for outreach and networking. Local email listservs are an easy, free medium for placing event announcements and general ads about your services, highlighting how your agency is ready and able to serve LGBT individuals and families. In areas with vibrant LGBT communities, email blasts (large-scale group emails) are

used widely to get the word out about events and services among community members. In areas with limited or no visible LGBT community, local listservs are especially important tools for reaching members of the population who otherwise might not be accessed through in-person outreach.

One effective tool that organizations have used, in urban as well as rural areas, is to create a MySpace page advertising the organization's services. Others have used web sites frequented by members of the LGBT community. Your organization can target the population, describe its services, and provide information and support. One Central Californian organization spends several hours per day answering questions and providing support through online chats with clients and potential clients. Indeed, online communications can be especially effective in areas with limited or no LGBT community resources. Access to the Internet varies by age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status; Internet support is most effective at reaching educated, financially stable members of the LGBT community, primarily gay men.

### **Other Marketing and Outreach Methods**

Radio and television ads are typically out of budget for most AOD service organizations, but if there are radio shows that focus on health and support in your area, you can advertise your services free as a guest. You can also utilize TV network news, web interview shows, and podcasts to get the word out. Talk about your commitment to diversity. Even the addition of the phrase "Services available to LGBT persons" lets LGBT individuals know that you are welcoming to them. In addition, you can raise LGBT concerns in the community at inter-agency meetings, community forums, and other meetings.

If your budget allows for print advertizing, you can utilize local and regional LGBT publications. For example, *Frontiers Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Curve Magazine*, *planetout.com*, *LGBT Resource Guides*, and other such print and online resources can be accessed by LGBT persons in your area via the Internet and mail. Advertising about LGBT-friendly substance abuse services increases visibility and awareness, and provides additional resources on the subject of substance abuse in LGBT populations. In addition, an article written about your services is an excellent, no-cost way to get the word out.

### **Written/Printed Materials**

Written materials, such as pamphlets and flyers about your organization, can be inclusive of LGBT persons by utilizing images of LGBT persons and families, and gen-

der-neutral language such as the term “partner.” When referring to gender-specific programs or groups, you can indicate that you are welcoming to transgendered individuals by stating, for instance, that your “women’s program serves all persons who identify as women.”

## **Conducting a Needs Assessment on LGBT Populations**

Community-based research serves the dual goal of identifying community needs for the purposes of program design, as well as getting the word out about local services and highlighting the issue of substance abuse in the LGBT community. If possible, conduct focus groups and/or surveys, in-person or online, focusing on local LGBT populations. As a start, an anonymous survey sent to LGBT groups within a 50 mile radius of your organization will help identify community needs and signal that your organization is interested in serving the LGBT community.

Ensure that your survey instruments are as open-ended as possible, and that the sample is inclusive of the breadth of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning community members in your area. Make a special effort to access underserved populations, such as “down low” individuals (straight-identified men who have undisclosed sex with men), bisexual people, and female-to-male and male-to-female transgendered individuals. You can promote the needs assessment through local community organizations, email listservs, flyers at LGBT events and programs, LGBT newspapers, and other forms of media.

## **Identifying and Utilizing LGBT Resources and Referrals**

Many substance abuse organizations serve LGBT clients with needs that their organization cannot meet. Providers often need help problem solving on a particular challenge, an appropriate support group in their area, or any number of other resources. Yet sometimes it can be difficult to identify local, regional, statewide, and national resources that can assist them to more effectively serve their LGBT clients. The following are some suggestions for identifying and utilizing LGBT resources and referrals.

### **Researching on the Internet**

The Internet is a quick, easy tool for locating vital information and resources for LGBT clients. Use Google or another search engine to locate LGBT-welcoming servic-

es in your area. Looking for general LGBT resources in a relatively isolated area? Type “gay, your town’s name” and see what pops up. Looking for an LGBT-friendly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in an urban setting? Type “LGBT, your city, AA groups.” Whether you’re looking for transitional housing, a substance-free LGBT event, or a transgender support group, the Internet can assist you.

Many larger organizations have websites with clear, written materials on specific issues. For instance, organizations such as the Transgender Law Center ([www.transgenderlawcenter.org](http://www.transgenderlawcenter.org)), the National Center for Transgender Equality ([www.nctequality.org](http://www.nctequality.org)), the National Center for Lesbian Rights ([www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)), Lambda Legal ([www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)) and others provide helpful guides and information about legal challenges and issues of discrimination. For instance, if you have a transgendered client who needs help changing their identity documents to reflect their name and gender, the Transgender Law Center, a California-based organization, has online materials that can assist you and your client.

### **Working in Partnership with Others**

In addition to the Internet, contact local providers who serve LGBT populations for referrals to local services. For instance, if you need a referral to a local support group, contact a local LGBT organization, center, or social group. This is one reason that it is so important to build effective partnerships with organizations and providers that serve LGBT populations. These networks can be very useful when trying to locate an appropriate referral.

If you are located in an area with limited services for LGBT individuals, you may not be able to locate a local service that is the right fit for your LGBT client. Identify to what extent the client is able to travel, and assist the client in accessing online support.

### **Identifying LGBT-Friendly Resources**

In addition to helping your clients connect to LGBT-specific resources, you may also need to locate LGBT-friendly resources. When you contact a referral source, it is important to determine if it is welcoming to LGBT clients without violating the confidentiality of the prospective client. Ask general questions about their program to determine what their services are and if they work with a broad spectrum of clients. Many clients are dealing with multiple issues, so it is important to know if referral sources are prepared to work with diverse LGBT populations, including undocumented, limited English-speaking, dual diagnosis, domestic violence survivors, and other issues.

If possible, do your homework before the need arises so that you are knowledgeable about LGBT-friendly re-

ferral sources. Speak to staff members and volunteers of LGBT organizations to determine if they have had experience with a referral source. Familiarize yourself and work in partnership with local transgender organizations that may be able to help you ascertain whether or not an organization is welcoming to transgendered clients.

When you contact a referral source, approach the interaction as a potential collaboration. Explain that you are trying to be more LGBT-inclusive and ask the contact person what their organization is doing to be more inclusive of LGBT populations. If possible, learn more about their approach to LGBT clients, staff cultural competency on LGBT issues, policies and procedures, and any efforts to create a non-discriminatory service environment.

For residential treatment, it may be helpful to learn more about the room set-up of the treatment facility so that your LGBT client knows what to expect. Some facilities develop case-by-case housing accommodations for transgendered clients, in particular, and this information

could help you problem solve with the client before she or he accesses the service.

## **Additional Resources**

As you expand and enhance your organization's services for LGBT populations, there are many components to evaluate and potentially revise so that all clients can participate fully. And as you market your services, work in partnership with others who serve the LGBT community, and identify relevant resources, you are sending a vital message that your organization welcomes and affirms this underserved population. To assist you in your endeavors, LGBT-TRISTAR offers LGBT and transgender-specific cultural competency training and technical assistance, at no cost to your California-based organization. For more information, go to [www.lgbt-tristar.com](http://www.lgbt-tristar.com) or contact Willy Wilkinson, MPH at [www.willywilkinson.com](http://www.willywilkinson.com)

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