Reintegration With Resilience: Helping LGBTQ+ Youth Thrive After Confinement

Why the Unique Needs of LGBTQ+ Youth Matter

LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual) youth leaving detention centers and other secure care facilities face a unique set of challenges that reentry programs can help address to increase the likelihood of successful reentry and reintegration. Young people who are LGBTQ+ are disproportionately represented within the juvenile justice system, accounting for 20% of all youth in juvenile justice facilities compared with 7% to 9% of all youth nationwide.[i], [ii] Reasons may include higher rates of arrest due to discrimination, higher rates of substance use disorder, family rejection that can lead to homelessness, employment discrimination, and the criminalization of behaviors related to their sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., survival sex work).[iii], [iv]

The experience of incarceration for LGBTQ+ youth is often exceptionally harmful. They are more likely to be inappropriately placed within facilities and targeted for abuse, harassment, and victimization by both peers and staff.[v] Many LGBTQ+ youth have already experienced significant trauma related to their identities before incarceration.[vi] Carceral settings further exacerbate the trauma, increasing the risk of PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation that hinder recovery after release.

Following release, many LGBTQ+ youth cannot return to supportive families. Some youth become homeless, and other youth have to hide their true selves for their safety.[vii] LGBTQ+ individuals also frequently face discrimination when looking for jobs or housing,[viii] which is amplified by the stigma of incarceration, making stable living situations hard to obtain. Further, social isolation increases mental health struggles and LGBTQ+ youth may not know where to find affirming friends, mentors, or community resources, worsening depression, anxiety, and hopelessness.[ix], [x]

What Reentry Programs Need to Know and How They Can Help

Safe and Affirming Environments

To genuinely support LGBTQ+ youth leaving secure care, reentry programs can take several significant steps. As a first step, reentry programs should be sure that all programming and supports are **explicitly safe and affirming for LGBTQ+ individuals**. Creating such **safe spaces** helps build trust and encourages young people to seek needed support. Creating visibly safe spaces goes beyond posters or inclusive language (though both are important). Reentry programs should consider intake forms with **inclusive gender and pronoun options**, **gender-neutral bathrooms** where feasible, and **staff who openly introduce themselves with pronouns**. Reentry programs should also ensure **robust privacy and confidentiality policies**, especially with potentially unsupportive families. Youth need to know their disclosures regarding sexual orientation and gender identity will not be shared without their explicit permission. Reentry programs may also consider ways to help youth build connections with supportive adults and peers within the LGBTQ+ community, which can create crucial lifelines as they navigate reentry.

Staff Training and Accountability

Additionally, reentry programs should **ensure all staff are trained** in cultural competency, implicit bias, and trauma-informed care, specifically surrounding LGBTQ+ issues, to help reduce the risk of further harm and ensure LGBTQ+ youth feel genuinely welcomed and understood. Training should have an **intersectionality focus** that includes how race, ethnicity, disability, and so forth interact with LGBTQ+ identities to create unique challenges. **Training should be ongoing**, particularly as terminology and understanding of gender and sexual orientation continue to evolve in the broader culture. Finally, reentry programs should **be accountable and hold staff accountable** by creating processes for addressing staff misgendering or discrimination, including how youth can report and have incidents addressed respectfully.

Connecting to Specialized Care

Further, it is vital for reentry programs to **partner with community organizations** that have **expertise and specialize in serving LGBTQ+ individuals** to provide specialized mental health care, housing assistance tailored to LGBTQ+ safety, and essential social connections. For example, reentry programs may seek out providers comfortable with gender-affirming care, experienced in LGBTQ+ trauma, and adept at addressing issues such as substance use disorder within an affirming context. Ideally, reentry programs **proactively build relationships** with these organizations **before youth exit secure care**, making referrals to a network of providers smoother and reducing the burden on the youth during a critical transition time. Finally, reentry programs should **look beyond clinical resources** and also prioritize connecting young people with LGBTQ+ youth centers, sports leagues, arts groups, and other places where they can form genuine connections and build a sense of belonging.

Addressing Specific Challenges

LGBTQ+ youth frequently face unique discrimination-based challenges with employment, housing, health care, and beyond. Reentry programs can further support LGBTQ+ youth by recognizing, understanding, and addressing these challenges and proactively ensuring LGBTQ+ youth are connected to relevant advocacy resources. Some examples may include the following:

- **Navigating Legal Issues**. Some youth might face legal barriers due to their gender identity, such as name and gender marker changes on identification documents. Reentry programs can help youth by connecting them with legal aid specializing in LGBTQ+ support.

- **Health Care Access**. Awareness of and access to quality mental, behavioral, and physical health care can be a daunting challenge for any young person during reentry, but particularly for many LGBTQ+ youth. Helping youth find inclusive health care providers and navigate the often complex world of insurance, especially if they need gender-affirming medical care, can be a vital component of reentry programming and support.

- **"Outing" Prevention**. Reentry programs can develop safety plans with youth regarding disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity in situations where disclosing might lead to harm (e.g., with unsupportive families, within potential jobs).

Important Note: It is also crucial for reentry programs working with LGBTQ+ youth to understand and mitigate the risks if a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity becomes known in their home environment or the broader community. Safety planning and support in finding affirming places to live or connect with chosen family become essential parts of a successful reentry plan.

Resources to Support This Work

The Pride Justice Resource Center, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, is a national resource center on justice-involved LGBTQ+ youth. The center provides training and technical assistance opportunities for juvenile justice practitioners and stakeholders to enhance their capacity, knowledge, and skills to improve and strengthen overall outcomes for youth who are LGBTQ+ and justice involved, including supporting system change and family engagement and acceptance and identifying gaps in knowledge related to LGBTQ+ and the intersections of multiple identities.

The Trevor Project offers direct crisis intervention services, mental health resources, and community support specifically for LGBTQ+ youth. Resources cover a range of topics, including sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health, talking about suicide, diversity among LGBTQ+ youth, and more.

PFLAG is the nation's largest organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them. PFLAG has hundreds of local chapters all over the country and their PFLAG Connects: Communities offers a safe, virtual, moderated space where people with shared experiences can connect each month.

Lambda Legal provides legal resources and advocacy to ensure all LGBTQ+ youth are safe and free from discrimination and harassment, whether in the hallways at school or in out-of-home care settings. Additionally, Lambda Legal assists LGBTQ+ individuals navigate potential discrimination issues after release.

Endnotes

[i] Center for American Progress, Movement Advancement Project, & Youth First. (2017). *Unjust: LGBTQ youth incarcerated in the juvenile justice system*. https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/lgbtq-incarcerated-youth.pdf

[ii] Stammen, E., & Ghandnoosh, N. (2022). *Incarcerated LGBTQ+ adults and youth*. The Sentencing Project. https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf

[iii] Stammen, E., & Ghandnoosh, N. (2022). *Incarcerated LGBTQ+ adults and youth*. The Sentencing Project. https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf

[iv] Jones, A. (2021, March 2). *Visualizing the unequal treatment of LGBTQ people in the criminal justice system*. Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/03/02/lgbtq/

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[vi] Mental Health America. (n.d.). *LGBTQ+ communities and mental health*. https://www.mhanational.org/issues/lgbtq-communities-and-mental-health

[vii] Vargas, N., Clark, J. L., Estrada, I. A., De La Torre, C., Yosha, N., Magaña Alvarez, M., Parker, R. G., & Garcia, J. (2022). Critical consciousness for connectivity: Decoding social isolation experienced by Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth using a multi-stakeholder approach to health equity. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(17), 11080. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191711080

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[x] Vargas, N., Clark, J. L., Estrada, I. A., De La Torre, C., Yosha, N., Magaña Alvarez, M., Parker, R. G., & Garcia, J. (2022). Critical consciousness for connectivity: Decoding social isolation experienced by Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth using a multi-stakeholder approach to health equity. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(17), 11080. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191711080