

OUR GOAL: Changing the stories of intolerance and abuse.

In the endlessly diverse environment of Miami, with its strong Gay and Lesbian communities, the experiences of youth with "non-straight" sexual identities may come as a surprise. For our already vulnerable Miami foster children, those who see themselves as belonging to a "sexual minority" have another and often dangerous layer of vulnerability.

Some statistics on GLBTQ Youth

Higher rates of suicide, maybe seven times higher for males than for their heterosexual peers.
25% were forced to leave their families as a result of announcing their orientation.
30% suffered physical violence from a family member when they came out.
40% of homeless youth are GLBTQ.
20-30% of foster children are GLBTQ.
75% report further abuse once they are in care.

"After my foster mother found out that I was a lesbian,

she told my social worker that she didn't want me in her house. She was afraid I would try something with her 12-year-old biological daughter."

"I left in the morning for school. When I came back to go to my room, somebody had spray painted the word faggot on the door...The staff didn't do nothing much but laugh when I told them." Afraid for his safety, this youth went AWOL and was homeless for a year.

"They had a behavior modification kind of program. Like, I could get a day pass or a weekend pass if I spent the afternoon playing football. They knew I was gay and that was the lifestyle I wanted, but they thought maybe they could change me."

From *GLBTQ Youth in Foster Care*
The National Center for Lesbian Rights
www.NCLR.org

GLBTQ

Gay: Men who feel romantic, emotional, and sexual attraction to other men; a term used to proclaim self-acceptance and self-affirmation.

Lesbian: A woman who feels romantically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to other women.

Bisexual: A person who feels romantic, emotional, and sexual attraction to both males and females.

Transgender: An umbrella term for all who feel that they are outside the boundaries of biological sex and culturally determined gender expression; may include transsexuals, cross-dressers, Two-Spirit people, drag performers, and people who do not identify with their biological sex.

Questioning: Those youth who are unsure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or who feel uncomfortable with the labels (such as straight, gay, male, female) available to them.



Legal and Policy Issues for GLBTQ Youth

The Florida Department of Children and Families has a bill of rights for children in the foster care system. Among the commitments is to have a safe place to live, privacy, help with a safety plan, counseling for specific concerns and staff who are properly trained to meet their needs. Meeting this commitment is always a challenge, but both national studies and local reports show that the service system is particularly inadequate with GLBTQ youth.

Identifying as GLBTQ can have a significant and sometimes dangerous effect on foster youth and be a major barrier to permanency. As Donald Cavanaugh, former assistant director of Safe Schools South Florida states, "There is no safe way to be gay."

Attorney Andrea Khoury has written in *Child Law Practice* about ways that attorneys can help GLBTQ youth, but her advice applies to everyone coming in contact with these foster children, including GALs, review panel members, case workers and judges.

First, professionals and volunteers need to balance the foster child's right to privacy with the knowledge that protecting and stabilizing the child's life may depend on understanding sexual orientation issues. What happens in daily life needs to be added to protections that are explicit in state and federal law.

- Is there a law against discrimination or harassment on school property for gender identity or sexual orientation? After physical appearance, sexual orientation is the most common "reason" for bullying at schools.

- Does the child welfare agency have a specific policy prohibiting discrimination by foster parents based on the sexual orientation of the child?
- Does the child welfare agency have nondiscrimination requirements for group settings where youth may live?

While these are formal features of service provision, what youth need from their advocates is the same sense of respect and safety that anyone would want.



rejection from their families. Services are needed to counsel and support families when a crisis has been precipitated by the child's sexual orientation. Education services for families and support for reunification are particularly helpful. In time, many parents can learn to accept their child's status. Independent living often becomes the goal for these children for lack of appropriate alternatives. They are also more likely

to end up in group care.

Homes

Appropriate homes for GLBTQ youth are needed. Agencies often focus on the urgency

Best Practice

The Child Welfare League of America has included best practice guidelines for GLBTQ youth in its series on foster care services. The following topics are included.

Staff Training

Foster care agencies need to develop nondiscrimination policies and teach staff how to apply them. The policy should protect the youth and be in written form. A clear grievance policy should be included. Training needs to include vocabulary and the exploration of myths and stereotypes about gay youth, but also practical skills on how to work with youth and families in a respectful and effective way.

Family-Centered Care

Services should use a family-centered approach. All foster youth have experienced a trauma related to entering care, but GLBTQ youth often experience a different kind of separation and

of finding a placement, not on the particular needs of this group. Agencies need to make special efforts to recruit caregivers and foster parents who can be accepting. These caregivers may also need ongoing support and training.

Group Settings

When youth must be in group settings, safety should be a priority. This means general sensitivity to safety issues, but also concrete preventive measures such as installing privacy doors in the bathrooms, staff training, and keeping the setting as small and supportive as possible. The goal should be to transition youth as soon as possible to less restrictive settings.

Health Care

GLBTQ youth should have access to inclusive, nondiscriminatory mental and physical health care. GLBTQ youth often have health issues because of their isolation from adults and a lack of access to health care. Chronic stress is also a factor in both physical and mental

health needs. Providers need to be found who understand the special needs and sensitivities of this group of foster children. It is particularly important to make sure that mental health services do not use a "reparative" model that tries to change the child's orientation. Transgender youth may need specialized providers who can help them bring the body more in line with self identification.

Education settings

All foster children have disruptions in education and are at risk for lower school performance. But the school setting is a prime site for both physical and verbal bullying of GLBTQ students. People in the youth's support system need to make sure that teachers, administrators and sometimes even the police know about harassment and violence and that school safety guidelines are applied to these incidents.

Lambda Legal and the Child Welfare League of America have also offered guidance on best practices in training around GLBTQ issues for children in care. Their firm recommendation is that training on GLBTQ issues should be "mandatory, comprehensive and ongoing."

Values clarification exercises can increase sensitivity and should be a core part of the training. Staff should also have access to special training to support youth in coming out. Learning to identify and change biases in language, such as a simple change from "Do you have a girlfriend?" to "Are you seeing someone?" can help create an accepting atmosphere.

Gay-Lesbian Adoption

In Florida, it is difficult to address the issue of nondiscriminatory practices with GLBTQ foster youth without addressing Florida's unique position banning adoption by same sex couples. While such couples are allowed to be foster

parents, Florida law does not allow them to create the permanent family that foster children need.

In a ruling that received national attention, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Cindy Lederman declared the position unconstitutional, rejecting the idea that it supports morality. She supported her ruling with the results of 30 years of research that shows that Lesbian and Gay parents are as effective and loving parents as straight people.

The ruling was made around the case of Frank Gill and his longtime partner in their efforts to adopt two half brothers that had been in their care since they entered the foster care system at ages one and four. They are now four and eight.

"John and James left a world of chronic neglect, emotional impoverishment and deprivation to enter a new world, foreign to them, a world that was nurturing, safe, structured and stimulating," Lederman wrote. "They are a family, a good family, in every way except the eyes of the law."

While many advocates have greeted the ruling enthusiastically, the story is not over. The state is appealing the ruling. It will not be a short process. Some have estimated it could take as long as two years to be finalized.



Family Resource Center Services

The Family Resource Center of South Florida Inc., in Partnership with the YES Institute is offering comprehensive services to GLBTQ youth through a grant from Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe Inc. Among the services offered will be specially trained foster parents and mental health counselors, links to health professionals, attorneys and other professionals who are gay-affirmative. For more information about this program, call the Family Resource Center at 305-374-6006. www.frcflorida.org

SAVE THE DATE

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SEPTEMBER 11, 2009
GLBTQ Symposium
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Through a grant from the Dade Community Foundation, Foster Care Review provides this newsletter to help inform the community about the special concerns of this group of young people. FCR will also be hosting a half-day symposium on September 11 to provide training for staff and volunteers who can help protect and support them.

For more information on this event visit our website at www.fostercarereview.org.

Local Resources From the Executive Director for Supporting Gay and Lesbian Youth

Pridelines Youth Services is dedicated to educating and empowering South Florida's GLBTQ youth and their straight allies in a safe and diverse environment. www.pridelines.org

Project Yes Schools, parent groups, healthcare settings, justice departments, clergy, and non-profit organizations contact YES Institute seeking non-confrontational communication and innovative education and training on gender, orientation, leadership and communication. www.projectyes.org

Safe Schools South Florida Safe Schools South Florida is the only organization in South Florida comprised of professional educators committed to training education professionals to recognize and intervene in harassment and bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) students and the children of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents. www.safeschoolssouthflorida.org



Twenty years ago, Foster Care Review was created from community frustration and outrage over the plight of children in the foster care system. FCR has now become a staple of Miami-Dade's response to the needs of these children. Trained volunteers represent the wisdom and soul of our community, reviewing the cases of children in foster care to assure that we meet our responsibilities to those who have become dependent on the state as parents.

The numbers are amazing. Our volunteers have reviewed the cases of over 41,000 foster children through 26,000 Judicial Reviews. A total of 600 volunteers have served, contributing 115,000 hours of service. Thirty-three percent have served over five years, and 10% have served more than ten.

Foster Care Review does more than coordinate the efforts of our volunteers. We help track system performance through our unique database of review statistics. We articulate the needs of particular groups of foster children such as older youth preparing to leave the system, the zero to five population, and GLBTQ youth. We provide training not only to our volunteers but to other community organizations. We advocate for dependent children before the legislature and local funders.

FCR is grateful for the years of support from our funders and our community. And we encourage you to join us. If you are interested in becoming a citizen review panel volunteer or in making a donation to support our work, contact us at 305-573-6665 or at info@fostercarereview.org.

Ana Maria Pozo, J.D., Executive Director

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 **DADE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**



155 South Miami Avenue, Suite 601
Miami FL 33130
Phone: 305-573-6665
e-mail: info@fostercarereview.org
www.fostercarereview.org

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