Coming Home:
SUPPORTING LGBTQ CHILDREN IN UTAH’S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Keeping Kids SAFE Campaign

REPORT ENDORSED BY:

National Association of Social Workers, Utah
National Association on Mental Illness, Utah
Salt Lake County Mayor’s Commission on Youth
Volunteers of America, Utah
Utah Foster/Adoptive Families Association
ENDORSEMENTS

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By Yvonne Paul, MSW
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“Children’s safety is paramount. Children and adults have a right to live free from abuse.”
—Principle One, DCFS Practice Guidelines

No one wants to look back and realize that they did not do everything they could to keep a child safe from harm. As their ultimate guardians, the Utah Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) must have the capacity to ensure the safety and support the creation of loving families for all children in Utah’s child welfare system. Unfortunately, this mandate is not currently being met for children who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) in the system. Although steps have been taken to educate some staff on the needs of LGBTQ children, significant gaps in policy and practice still remain. As DCFS staff have been exposed to information and training on how to best support LGBTQ children in foster care, they have issued a resounding cry for the creation of new standards to address the needs of LGBTQ children in DCFS’ Practice Guidelines. A practice guideline addressing the needs of LGBTQ children will implement consistent and regulated protocols that can be followed even if a supervisor or caseworker has little experience caring for LGBTQ children. By taking this step, DCFS can institute a standard of care throughout Utah’s child welfare system, so that all children can receive the safety they deserve.

In recent years, it has become evident that instituting clear policies and protocols to protect LGBTQ youth in child welfare settings is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. Several recent successful legal challenges to state child welfare systems (albeit mostly in juvenile justice divisions) reflect a systemic and profound lack of safety for marginalized youth in out-of-home care, especially LGBTQ adolescents. Courts are willing to hear these cases, many of which are settled at great cost to the implicated agency. There is consensus on the part of courts and lawmakers that effective agency policies provide a much needed solution. By creating practice guidelines that support staff in keeping all children safe, DCFS can ensure the well-being of children while strengthening a current vulnerability in Utah’s child welfare system.

This report aims to bring attention to current gaps faced by LGBTQ youth in Utah’s child welfare system and offers some key recommendations for how to better fulfill the DCFS mandate to ensure safety for all youth in its care. The report features data gathered by Utah

1 For more information on sexual orientation and gender identity, please go to page 22 of this report.
Pride and the Keeping Kids Safe Campaign through several channels, including: two rounds of statewide “listening forums” with key stakeholders in the system, a DCFS staff survey assessing how to improve service to LGBTQ and other marginalized children, and an unpublished study of Utah’s LGBTQ homeless youth population sponsored by the Salt Lake County Mayor’s Commission on Youth.2 The results from these studies are strikingly clear – DCFS needs to implement policy and practice guidelines specific to the needs of LGBTQ children.

Mission of the Keeping Kids Safe Campaign

LGBTQ children have become increasingly visible in our families, communities, and systems of care. The Keeping Kids Safe Campaign aims to ensure that LGBTQ children receive appropriate and equitable care in out-of-home settings throughout Utah. The Campaign is grounded in the belief that the voices and efforts of key stakeholders – including DCFS staff, foster parents, and children in foster care – should be engaged to strengthen the child welfare system and address the needs of LGBTQ children in care. The goal is to create policy that will provide guidance to staff and individuals responsible for the care of LGBTQ children in Utah’s child welfare system. The belief is that through collective efforts we can create a system of care to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.

Keeping Kids Safe Campaign History

In 2004, due to some serious safety concerns for LGBTQ children in Utah’s child welfare system, DCFS stakeholders were invited to participate in statewide focus groups or “listening forums” conducted in 13 cities across the country by the Child Welfare League of America. These listening forums raised the concerns of DCFS staff, foster parents, and children in foster care regarding the quality of care LGBTQ children were receiving throughout the system. Following the listening forums, DCFS and Utah Pride collaborated to implement cultural competency trainings for case workers regarding the needs of LGBTQ children in out-of-home care. This collaboration has continued since it started in 2006.

“My foster parents said, ‘You are being flamboyant for attention.’ But, that’s not the reason for me. I feel more feminine naturally... It wasn’t just a person on the street, or another kid, [who said this]. This was homophobia from my foster parents—the people who are in charge of my life. I felt so alone.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Youth in Foster Care

In 2010, Utah Pride convened a more extensive round of listening forums to assess the needs of stakeholders in each of the five DCFS regions in Utah. From these listening forums and cumulative evaluation feedback from 1,066 trainees over the last six years (including DCFS staff and foster parents), some converging trends surfaced:

- DCFS staff are often unaware of resources to support the needs of LGBTQ children or their families prior to participating in an LGBTQ cultural competency training.

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2 For more information on research methodology, please go to page 21 of this report.
• DCFS staff believe that their supervisors are not equipped to support challenges in meeting the needs of LGBTQ clients.

• DCFS staff need policies and practice guidelines that address issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity in order to better serve LGBTQ children in their care.

• Foster parents express that trainings are key to increasing their capacity to provide safer homes and understand the needs of all their children.

“\textit{I think it takes leadership, philosophy and worldview— and until those change, policies don’t change.}”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Case Worker

Of paramount concern amongst trainees was the resounding absence of dialogue within DCFS regarding the needs of LGBTQ children and the barriers to ensuring their ultimate safety. In response to this concern, DCFS and Utah Pride developed a staff-wide survey in 2012 to identify the specific challenges faced by DCFS staff when attempting to provide quality services to LGBTQ children in foster care.

In March 2012, the \textit{Keeping Kids Safe Campaign} was officially launched and hosted a historic gathering of DCFS administrators, staff, foster parents, adolescents in foster care, and community partners to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth in DCFS care. \textit{LGBTQ Youth Safety: An Out-of-Home Providers Summit} brought together 150 individuals – those most closely involved in the lives of children in foster care in Utah. The Summit included another round of listening forums, co-sponsored by DCFS, that generated recommendations to address safety concerns for LGBTQ children.

The Summit produced two notable outcomes. First, DCFS administrators at the Summit publicly demonstrated a level of commitment to addressing the needs of LGBTQ children that had never previously been shown. This signaled to DCFS staff and other stakeholders that keeping LGBTQ children safe is a priority of the Division and that concrete steps would be taken to ensure this. The Summit also revealed a widespread commitment on the part of stakeholders throughout the system to work together as part of the \textit{Keeping Kids Safe Campaign} to advocate for improved services for LGBTQ youth in Utah’s child welfare system. From the Summit, one thing became clear – the system itself is calling for change.

\textbf{Keeping Kids Safe Campaign Key Recommendations:}

1. \textit{Institute an official DCFS practice guideline that provides clear policy protocol and procedures for DCFS staff and contracting agencies to ensure LGBTQ youth safety.}

2. \textit{Require mandatory staff training for all current and future DCFS employees to build their capacity to understand and meet the needs of LGBTQ youth.}
Who DCFS Serves

The Utah Department of Human Services reported serving 4,664 children through foster care during fiscal year 2011. Because the Utah Department of Human Services does not currently collect demographic information on the number of LGBTQ children in the child welfare system, it is difficult to accurately track placement, permanence or safety records in relationship to sexual orientation and gender identity. This lack of data suggests that LGBTQ children are both figuratively and literally falling through the cracks in Utah. However, in 2012, DCFS staff responded to a survey regarding the improvement of services to LGBTQ and other marginalized children. Survey respondents were asked to report if they currently serve or have ever served LGBTQ children. About two-thirds (63%) work or have worked with children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or who are questioning their sexuality, 39% work or have worked with children who are struggling with their gender identity, and 11% work or have worked with children who identify as transgender.

Percentage of DCFS staff who serve LGBTQ children

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What’s at Stake for Utah’s Children?

Context for LGBTQ Children in Utah’s Child Welfare system

LGBTQ children often face serious physical and emotional abuse at home and in child welfare settings. The child welfare system and other out-of-home placements often reach these children at particularly vulnerable times in their lives with LGBTQ adolescents being at increased risk. For many LGBTQ children, their first experience of abuse is related to articulated sexual orientation or gender non-conforming expression. In fact, studies show that one-third of LGBTQ children who are in out-of-home placements...
Coming Home: Supporting LGBTQ Children in Utah’s Foster Care System

are there because they have been forced to leave their homes due to being LGBTQ. These children come into the system carrying the stress of traumatic experiences layered with stigma based on their identity and seek safety and understanding from caseworkers, foster parents and staff who are there to serve and support them. However, when the child welfare system neglects to address their needs or alienates an LGBTQ child further, their risk of suicide, lack of permanency, and eventual homelessness increases dramatically.

DCFS Children In Their Own Voice: The Harm of Silence and Stigma

“Even if you don’t agree with your foster kid’s choices, just being there for them is so important. It can change their life by telling them you’re there to listen.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Youth in Foster Care

The cumulative impact of teasing, rejection, and stigma that LGBTQ children endure in their formative years takes a toll. Not only do many LGBTQ children face rejection from their birth family, but they also encounter a lack of support from their foster family. The LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit listening forum provided a historic platform for LGBTQ children in Utah’s child welfare system to share their stories and experiences. The common themes in the participants’ stories reveal both the urgency and necessity of creating a child welfare system in Utah that will ensure their safety.

One common theme that emerged from LGBTQ children in foster care is their need to hide key aspects of their identity related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in order to avoid harassment and maintain some level of stability while in DCFS care. Those who spoke about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, or who “came out” as LGBTQ, reported having trouble maintaining placements. Several adolescents spoke to receiving peer advice or recommendations to NOT disclose their sexual orientation as a way to ensure a stable placement.

“One youth who came out to me didn’t come out to his foster family and that secured his housing. He’s still there today in the closet. By silencing his sexuality, he has secured a home.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Case Worker

One youth participant shared that after “aging out” of care and sustaining familial ties to her foster family, she finally felt the courage to share with them that she was a lesbian. Upon hearing this, the family then asked her to stay away and did not allow her to visit them. Another youth shared that his ongoing struggle with homophobia from his foster parents led to a suicide attempt. This type of rejection all too often defines the experiences of Utah’s LGBTQ children in foster care and demonstrates an urgent need to address their safety.

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A recurring theme in interviews with homeless adolescents from a survey of LGBTQ homeless youth, conducted in 2011 by Utah Pride for the Salt Lake County Mayor’s Commission on Youth, captures another disturbing trend for LGBTQ children in Utah. One reason that LGBTQ young people voluntarily leave their homes is the experience of being forced by a parent or caregiver to engage in reparative therapy, with the intent to change their sexual orientation or gender identity. The fact that many LGBTQ youth prefer to risk survival on the streets, rather than face the perception that they must be changed to be loved by their families, is of grave concern and underscores the critical need for all children to feel safe and understood by their families. This trend offers compelling evidence for creating the tools, policies, and practices necessary to ensure LGBTQ youth feel safe and secure in their out-of-home placements.

“For [LGBTQ] children, if they've already been rejected by the family who is their primary caretaker, it leaves a huge break in their lives. As foster parents, we can help heal that, and as caseworkers, we can help heal that too.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Case Worker

Suicide and Homelessness Among Utah’s Children in Foster Care

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for those aged 15-19 in Utah. This statistic is alarming enough on its own, but, unfortunately, it is even more dramatic for LGBTQ youth who face harassment, lack of safety, and family rejection. The Commission on Youth survey referenced above also found that 45% of homeless youth in Utah report experiences of harassment or discrimination in foster care settings due to being LGBTQ; 25% report feeling “unsafe” or “very unsafe” in their previous foster home placements; and 84% report feeling that their placement did not meet their needs or support their identity as LGBTQ. One of the most disturbing findings is that 66% of homeless youth surveyed had attempted suicide. Research published in The Journal of Pediatrics reports that LGBTQ young people who experience family rejection are more than eight times as likely to attempt suicide, nearly six times as likely to be depressed, and more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs when compared to LGBTQ young adults whose identity is accepted by their parents and caregivers.

When LGBTQ children do not feel safe or supported by their caregivers, they are not only at higher risk for suicide, but also for homelessness. As the report Supportive Families, Healthy Children by Caitlin Ryan and Robert Rees (2012) states:

Tragically, by sending rejecting messages, some families drive their gay or transgender children out of the family circle and into high-risk environments and behaviors. Our research shows that family rejection...contributes to family disruption and homelessness.

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6 Caitlin Ryan, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz and Jorge Sanchez, Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young Adults, Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009.
Though they are only thought to make up between 5% and 7% of the total child population, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that gay and transgender children make up about 20% of homeless children nationwide, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force suggests that the number may be as high as 40%. Volunteers of America, Utah reports a 2010 Salt Lake County survey result, 41% of the 196 homeless youth (ages 15 – 22) identified as LGBTQ. According to a study by the Center for American Progress, 62% of homeless LGBTQ youth attempt suicide compared to 29% of their heterosexual, homeless peers. These statistics reveal the link between family environments that are unsupportive to a child’s sexual orientation and gender identity and the negative impact on that child’s baseline safety, health, and welfare. In the report quoted above, Ryan and Rees note that Elder Dallin Oaks of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has stated, “Even children who go against their parents' advice need love and understanding, and need to feel that they are part of the family.”

DCFS can play a critical role in breaking the cycle of family rejection that can lead to an increased risk for suicide and homelessness for LGBTQ children throughout the state. Whether a child placed in foster care at a young age identifies later in life as LGBTQ or an adolescent comes into the system due to family rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity, it is crucial that DCFS does everything in its power to provide a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ children—including instituting policies to protect LGBTQ youth. It is only by tackling the issue in a comprehensive and systemic way that the harmful, and at times deadly, impact of family rejection can be reduced.

Lack of Permanency Leaves Utah’s Children without a Safety Net

Permanency is inextricably linked to a child’s overall feeling of safety and is a primary goal for all children in foster care in the United States. A child’s outcomes increase significantly when they are placed in a foster home where they remain without transfer until they “age out,” or, even more ideally, when an adoptive home is found for the child. In 2010, the Utah Department of Human Services (DHS) identified permanency as a priority issue needing improvement in its annual DHS Statewide Assessment—and this is even more urgent for LGBTQ youth in foster care. The US Department of Health and Human Services cites that older children stay in foster care longer and achieve permanency at lower rates than younger children, which disproportionately impacts LGBTQ adolescents who enter the system. LGBTQ children and youth often lack permanent connections to their communities and families of origin. In Achieving Permanency for LGBTQ Youth, researchers state:

“For LGBTQ youth, the failure to achieve permanence also heightens the risk of social isolation, loneliness, discriminatory treatment, harassment, and abuse. Because of these

9 Salt Lake County Task Force to End Youth Homelessness. Ending Youth Homelessness. February 2011, p5.
10 Quintana, Rosenthal and Kehely.
12 State of Utah, Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services, Statewide Assessment, p44.
safety and well-being risks, LGBTQ youth have significant needs for the security and support of a nurturing, accepting, and affirming family.”

Mallon, Aledort, and Ferrera found in their sample of 45 LGBTQ youth that the average number of placements for LGBTQ youth in foster care was 6.35, a finding that the researchers associated with non-affirming placements that either passively encourage LGBTQ youth to leave their placements by neglecting their needs or that actively discriminate against them. Additionally, the lack of consistent, supportive relationships with adults places LGBTQ youth at a significant disadvantage psychologically, economically, and socially.

Children who do not achieve permanent placements and transition out of the foster care system often leave with few skills, minimal education, and inadequate preparation for living as independent adults. A 2007 study by the Pew Charitable Trust found that 1 in 4 children who “age out” will be incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care, 1 in 5 will become homeless, only half will graduate from high school and less than 3% will receive college degrees. Among other negative outcomes, the Annie E. Casey Foundation cites data indicating that fewer than 20% are able to support themselves after aging out.

The challenges associated with transitioning out of foster care for LGBTQ children are even more pronounced due to discrimination faced in employment, housing, and higher education.

Here in Utah, the 2012 DCFS survey respondents and 2012 listening forum participants indicate that permanency continues to be a challenge for LGBTQ children in their care. Survey respondents identify that LGBTQ children are 39% more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be placed in a group home than in a permanent home. Over the last five years, 10% of children in the Utah child welfare system aged out of care. With no family support to draw upon, the stability and ultimate well-being of these children are compromised, leaving them without a safety net.

Any effort to increase overall permanency for children in DCFS must address the safety needs of LGBTQ children and adolescents if it is to be successful. In addition, not only does every DCFS staff person need to have the skills required to effectively place LGBTQ children with families that have a high likelihood of becoming permanent, but they need system-wide supports to ensure that an understanding environment exists for any child placed in the system, thus increasing the likelihood for permanence for LGBTQ children.

“A few years ago to ask who would take an openly LGBTQ kid into their home, and I only got one name.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Case Worker

What We Can Do to Keep Utah’s Children Safe

A National Movement to Ensure Safety for LGBTQ Children in Foster Care

Over the past ten years, efforts to improve safety for LGBTQ youth in foster care settings have proliferated throughout the United States. In 2002, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)—the nation’s oldest child welfare professional organization—joined the Lambda Legal Education and Defense Fund to create the Fostering Transitions Project. The Fostering Transitions Project sponsored a series of regional “listening forums” of key
Coming Home: Supporting LGBTQ Children in Utah’s Foster Care System

stakeholders in child welfare systems across the country, including Utah DCFS, and published a report called Out of the Margins. In 2006, using cutting edge research by Caitlin Ryan and Rafael Diaz from San Francisco State University as a framework, CWLA published its Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBT Youth in Out-of-Home Care. The guide contains the first-ever set of comprehensive professional guidelines for how child welfare and juvenile justice professionals can best serve LGBTQ children in state care. These guidelines were developed from recommendations from the Model Standards Project, a collaboration between Legal Services for Children, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR).

In April 2011, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services encouraged all child welfare agencies, foster parents, and individuals working with children in care to ensure that LGBTQ children are protected and supported. Answering this call, the Casey Family Program, a private provider of foster care and long-term placement services, recently offered comprehensive on-site training to 111 staff members in its Western Regional offices in California, Arizona, and Hawaii on how to address the challenges facing LGBTQ children in out-of-home care. An evaluation of the training shows significant statistical change in sensitivity and ability to provide more culturally appropriate services for LGBTQ children. Over the years, these national projects and others like them, have continued to issue recommendations, guidelines, training tools, and resources for the child welfare field and beyond, including the groundbreaking report, Hidden Injustice: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Juvenile Courts (2009), for the juvenile justice field. In addition to these national efforts, eight states currently have agency-wide practice guidelines or non-discrimination policies that protect LGBTQ children in the foster care system, including Nevada and Arizona.

“I think when we do what’s right for kids, we’re addressing [their needs]. Our agency policies are how we [can] carry out a broader safety initiative”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Administrator

In April 2011, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services encouraged all child welfare agencies, foster parents, and individuals working with children in care to ensure that LGBTQ children are protected and supported. Answering this call, the Casey Family Program, a private provider of foster care and long-term placement services, recently offered comprehensive on-site training to 111 staff members in its Western Regional offices in California, Arizona, and Hawaii on how to address the challenges facing LGBTQ children in out-of-home care. An evaluation of the training shows significant statistical change in sensitivity and ability to provide more culturally appropriate services for LGBTQ children. Over the years, these national projects and others like them, have continued to issue recommendations, guidelines, training tools, and resources for the child welfare field and beyond, including the groundbreaking report, Hidden Injustice: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Juvenile Courts (2009), for the juvenile justice field. In addition to these national efforts, eight states currently have agency-wide practice guidelines or non-discrimination policies that protect LGBTQ children in the foster care system, including Nevada and Arizona.

—Ibid

18 Memorandum issued by Commissioner Bryan Samuels, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, April 6, 2011
How Utah Fits Into the Picture

Utah DCFS currently lacks non-discrimination policies that protect children on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as practice guidelines that provide caseworkers with clear agency-wide protocols for how to work with LGBTQ children. Nearly 90% of staff polled in the 2012 DCFS survey, as well as 95% of staff who participated in LGBTQ cultural competency trainings in 2011 and 2012, indicate that they would find practice guidelines very useful for improving service delivery to LGBTQ clients, and that they seek leadership from agency decision-makers to achieve this goal. Additionally, respondents state that in order to successfully implement these practice guidelines, they will need clear and consistent guidance from direct supervisors on how to best address the needs of LGBTQ children.

Utah is not the first state to tackle these issues and can follow the lead of its neighbors in Arizona and Nevada in protecting LGBTQ children. In 2006, the Arizona Division of Youth and Families integrated the needs specific to LGBTQ youth throughout its existing policies. Subsequently, in 2007, Clark County Department of Family Services in Nevada developed a stronger set of protections that impacts 76% of the youth in foster care in that state. This policy applies to all its employees, foster parents, and contracting agencies and ensures that LGBTQ youth under its care receive non-discriminatory, safe and affirming services. Utah DCFS is already making strides towards drafting its own set of policies to ensure the safety of LGBTQ children in its care. A comprehensive set of DCFS policies and practice guidelines can address how to meet the needs of LGBTQ children in all areas of the Division’s purview.

“We need someone at the very top to come out and say that [talking about] this is okay. I think this is a huge first step!”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Administrator

Solutions From Within: Key Stakeholder Perspectives

The Keeping Kids Safe Campaign has found that key stakeholders in Utah’s child welfare system are in agreement – DCFS policy protections for LGBTQ children in care are not only needed, but urgent. It is the role of Utah DCFS Quality Improvement Committees to review information and data and to ask the tough questions that ultimately lead to system-wide improvements. In May 2012, a survey of statewide and regional Quality Improvement Committee members found that the safety of LGBTQ children in DCFS placements is a policy issue that members want to address within the next six months. The need for policy direction is echoed by the voices of two additional key stakeholders in the system – DCFS direct service staff and foster parents – who are charged with caring daily for the needs of Utah’s most vulnerable children and experience firsthand the limitations of DCFS’ current lack of policy on issues related to LGBTQ children. What follows are recommendations from those key stakeholders that were voiced at the Foster Youth Providers’ Summit Listening Forum in March 2012.

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20 Quality Improvement Committee Statewide and Regional Member Survey, conducted by Eric Mitchel, of Fifth Ocean Consulting, May 2012.
DCFS Staff: Seeking Policy Guidance, Education, and Training

“[Education] is really the issue; we need more education for our staff, [and] within our agencies.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Administrator

A majority of DCFS staff at the listening forums asserted that in addition to policy guidance they need comprehensive training to improve their ability to meet the needs of LGBTQ children in care. Some key issues that staff mentioned they needed additional training on were how to build a trusting, safe relationship with LGBTQ children, how to support an LGBTQ child when the child discloses their identity, what steps are necessary to ensure a safe placement for that child, and how to connect the child to appropriate community resources and support. Additionally, staff asserted that LGBTQ cultural competency trainings need to be delivered throughout all levels of the child welfare system, including new and existing staff, foster and proctor families, families of origin, health and mental health providers, Guardians ad Litem, judges, and other court personnel.

Utah Pride currently partners with DCFS to provide cultural competency trainings on the needs of LGBTQ children in all five DCFS regions. However, these trainings are not currently a mandatory requirement for DCFS employees. The survey research shows a vast majority (92%) of DCFS staff support mandatory training on best practices as one of the solutions to increasing safety and addressing the needs of LGBTQ children in the system. Survey findings also showed that 37% of respondents do not have access to resources to support LGBQ clients, and 68% don’t have access to resources or training to support transgender clients. Roughly 16% percent of the respondents were not aware that any resources or training existed around serving LGBTQ clients. Around 35% of the respondents agreed that it is challenging to get informed guidance from a supervisor on the care of LGBTQ children.

Taking a bold first step, the director of the DCFS Southwest region instituted a mandatory training on the needs of LGBTQ children for all direct service staff, to which employees indicated a very positive response. While it is perhaps too soon to tell if there is a correlation between mandatory training and the overall safety of LGBTQ children in foster placements in the Southwest Region, this successful first step points to a need for increased leadership on the part of supervisors and directors.

“My very first case was with a lesbian youth. I was surprised [that] in the whole pre-service training [for new DCFS employees] that they never touched on the issue at all.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Case Worker

Mandatory Training

The director of the DCFS Southwest region instituted a mandatory training on the needs of LGBTQ children for all direct service staff, to which employees indicated a very positive response. This successful first step points to a need for increased leadership on the part of supervisors and directors.
DCFS Foster Parents: Ensuring Safe Homes for all Children

“A lot of foster parents, have never been asked the question [about our level of LGBTQ competency], and we end up with kids in our home who are LGBTQ and we don’t have the training at all.”

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Foster Parent

Foster parents at the listening forum said that they need additional resources and training to ensure that they are providing a safe and supportive home to their LGBTQ children. Parents also note that a DCFS policy that requires foster parents to go through this type of training would increase the number of supportive homes for LGBTQ children. Some mentioned that they might have unintentionally created an environment that feels isolating to an LGBTQ child who has not yet disclosed their identity. Another foster parent mentioned that any one of her children might end up being LGBTQ, and it is important for her to discuss issues of sexual orientation and gender identity openly with all her children.

The current lack of training and support for foster parents directly impacts both the stability and permanency of placements for LGBTQ children. A majority of DCFS staff at the listening forum shared that they have to conceal or omit knowledge of the gender identity or sexual orientation of a client in order to secure a placement for that child. In the 2012 DCFS survey, 77% of the respondents indicated that finding a culturally competent placement for LGBTQ clients was a barrier to providing care for them. Nearly 90% of those surveyed identified knowledge of and access to culturally competent placements as a solution to challenges faced by LGBTQ children currently in DCFS care.

While foster parents at the listening forum affirmed that all children, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity should be loved equally, over 70% of DCFS survey respondents reported that LGBTQ children are likely to face conflict with their foster family because of issues of sexuality and gender identity. Nurturing safety and understanding in out-of-home placements means providing resources for all foster parents on how to address conflict that may arise due to issues of sexuality and gender. As Ryan and Rees state, “Parents and caregivers who are capable of even a little change – being a little less rejecting and a little more...
supportive – can make an important difference in reducing their adolescent’s risk for serious health problems. Overall, 95% of the participants in the DCFS survey indicated that conflict mediation or prevention resources for foster parents would be useful.

While the Foster Care Foundation is primarily responsible for foster parent training and support, a DCFS mandate to train all foster parents on LGBTQ cultural competency would provide considerable support for child safety. Foster parents themselves identify, in post-training evaluations, that information to deepen an understanding of LGBTQ children and how to best parent them is invaluable to providing the necessary support to children in their homes. In addition, current DCFS safety assessments of potential foster homes do not address issues of competency regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. Along with systemic training of foster parents, DCFS should set both standards and expectations of all foster parents to provide safe and supportive homes to LGBTQ children.

"As foster parents, we need more access to information and training on these issues. I found out about this Summit by accident. It’s something that many more foster parents would participate in if they had the information."

—LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit, March 2012, Foster Parent

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The mandate is clear – it is time for DCFS to take the next step. DCFS staff, foster parents, and children are issuing a resounding cry for the creation of policies, practice guidelines, and mandatory trainings to address the needs of LGBTQ youth and to ensure their safety. A combination of policy change and system-wide trainings will safeguard what is the bottom line for all children in DCFS care – safety, support, and the care of a loving family.

From the *Keeping Kids Safe Campaign* standpoint, DCFS has three key incentives for implementing policy and practice guidelines to support the safety and well-being of LGBTQ children in care:

1. DCFS has a legal responsibility and mandated oversight for the protection of all children in foster care and must do everything possible to keep every child safe. Being proactive by instituting comprehensive policies and practice guidelines can avert systemic vulnerability.

2. DCFS staff and foster parents who step into the role of caregivers are stewards of the child’s best interests and must have the policy guidance, resources, and training to effectively meet the needs of all children they care for and to establish safe and supportive environments.

3. DCFS should continue to stay at the forefront of national child welfare best practices by implementing federal recommendations to create policy protections for LGBTQ children in foster care.

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The top priority of DCFS and the *Keeping Kids Safe Campaign* are synonymous—to ensure the safety of all children in Utah. The data, analysis, and recommendations contained in this report show both where the child welfare system is succeeding and where more work is needed. While this report highlights key recommendations related to policy and practice guidelines, additional recommendations were also generated by *Keeping Kids Safe Campaign* stakeholders and endorsed by National Association of Social Workers, Utah; National Association of Mental Illness, Utah; Volunteers of America, Utah; Salt Lake County Commission on Youth and Utah Foster/Adoptive Families Association. A summary of these recommendations follows.

**Key Recommendations Generated by *Keeping Kids Safe Campaign* Stakeholders**

1. Put in place a statewide practice guideline for LGBTQ youth that provides clear policy and procedures for DCFS staff and contracting agencies to ensure LGBTQ youth safety.

2. Require mandatory initial and ongoing cultural competency training for all DCFS staff to build their capacity to understand and meet the needs of LGBTQ children.

**Additional Recommendations to Strengthen Utah’s Child Welfare System**

- Integrate training content on LGBTQ competency into all existing DCFS trainings provided to staff throughout system.
- Integrate concerns of LGBTQ children into all new DCFS policy and practice initiatives related to permanency, family preservation, transition to adult living, and other key issues related to improving outcomes for children in foster care.
- Require all DCFS regional directors and supervisors to attend advanced training to build their capacity to support service delivery for LGBTQ children.
- Create an LGBTQ staff position as an internal resource to support regional directors, caseworkers, and foster parents to problem solve and support the needs of LGBTQ children in foster care.
- Identify DCFS regional point people who will function as experts on local resources and information to meet the needs of LGBTQ children.
- Partner with two key agencies – Department of Licensing and the Utah Foster Care Foundation – to integrate LGBTQ concerns into foster placement assessment tools and to proactively identify affirming placements for LGBTQ children in foster care.
- Require LGBTQ competency training for every parent to ensure the safety of LGBTQ children in all foster homes and provide research-based interventions to support families with LGBTQ children.
- Recognize the overlap in service provision with stakeholders in the juvenile justice system (i.e. Juvenile Justice Services, UT State Juvenile Court, Office of Guardian ad Litem, etc.) and coordinate with administrators to implement similar policy protections for LGBTQ children.
• Support and nurture the expanded advocacy capacity of the statewide Quality Improvement Committee to lobby the state legislature on restrictive state-level policies that limit positive kinship and placement options for LGBTQ children receiving services through DCFS.

Methodology

Utah Pride conducted five Listening Forums in conjunction with the Keeping Kids Safe Campaign’s – LGBTQ Safety: A Foster Youth Providers’ Summit in Salt Lake City, UT on March 9, 2012. In total, 150 individuals including youth in foster care, foster parents, and Utah Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff attended the 2012 Summit. The Listening Forums, co-hosted by DCFS and Utah Pride, were modeled after similar Regional Listening Forums conducted by the Child Welfare League of America across the country between September 2003 and December 2004 with the ultimate goal of improving systems of care for LGBTQ children in foster care. DCFS administrators, along with Utah Pride staff facilitated the 2012 Safety Summit Listening Forums. Additionally, Utah Pride conducted an anonymous DCFS staff survey called Keeping Kids Safe in Our Care in January 2012, which was completed by 82 staff. Secondary sources of information for the report include “Data for the Division of Child and Family Services Quality Improvement Committees” compiled for the QIC Summit in December 2011, the Utah Department of Human Services 2011 Annual Report, the 2010 State of Utah Child and Family Services Statewide Assessment, and a survey of LGBTQ homeless children conducted in 2011 by Utah Pride for the Salt Lake County Mayor’s Commission on Youth.
Coming Home: Supporting LGBTQ Children in Utah’s Foster Care System

What Does LGBTQ Mean?

**Sexual Orientation**

Sexual orientation is a central part of every person’s identity and is believed to be developed by adolescence. Sexual orientation is comprised of attraction, identity, and behavior and focuses on intimate human relationships. Sexual attraction is only one aspect of a person’s sexual orientation.

Homosexuality and bisexuality are part of the normal range of human sexual identity. Homosexual and bisexual people are found in diverse cultures both historically and in the present. The words that people use to describe their sexual identity are different in many cultures and languages. Many people who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with people of the same gender may call themselves gay. Women who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with other women may call themselves lesbian. Those who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with males and females may think of themselves as bisexual. Just like heterosexuals, people can know they are lesbian, gay or bisexual without ever being sexually active with another person. This is because sexual orientation relates to human relationships and interpersonal connections with others, not just sexual attraction or behavior.

**Gender Identity**

Everyone also has a gender identity—a deep sense of being male or female—that is very clear by age three. Children learn from others, especially from their families, how girls and boys in their ethnic group and culture are expected to behave.

Some children feel very deeply that their inner sense of being male or female (their “gender identity”) is not the same as their physical body. These children often tell their parents and others that they believe their gender identity does not match their physical body. They are likely to identify as transgender once they learn about gender identity, and learn that they are not alone and that there are other people who feel who like they do. Their behavior may also be called gender variant or gender non-conforming.

Children and adolescents who do not look or behave the way that girls and boys are expected to behave by their families and by society are often ridiculed by others. Both adults and peers may call them names or discriminate against them. They are also at risk for physical abuse and violence, and parents often fear that these children will be hurt by others. Parents, foster parents, families, and caregivers can have a very important impact on promoting these children’s well-being. This includes helping them learn positive coping skills and how to deal with ridicule and discrimination from others.

**Questioning**

Adolescence can be a period of experimentation, and many youths may question their sexual feelings. Becoming aware of sexual feelings is a normal developmental task of adolescence. Sometimes adolescents have same-sex feelings or experiences that cause confusion about their sexual orientation. This confusion appears to decline over time, with different outcomes for different individuals.

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Local Resources to Support LGBTQ Youth

**Utah Pride** [utahpridecenter.org](http://utahpridecenter.org)
355 North 300 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84103
(801) 539-8800 ext. 17

Utah Pride has a youth activity center, TINT, that provides a safe place for LGBTQ youth ages 14 – 20 to hang out with other youth. Utah Pride also provides support groups and structured activities for youth and their loved ones (including caregivers/parents), and offers support and resources to professionals and caregivers working in youth-centered environments.

**Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)** [pflag.org](http://pflag.org)

- **PFLAG Salt Lake City** 801-688-2281 / slcpflag@gmail.com
- **PFLAG Ogden** 801-388-9358 / ogdenpflag@q.com
- **PFLAG Logan** 435-213-5993 / pflaglogan@gmail.com
- **PFLAG St. George** 435-673-3356 / pflag.saintgeorge@gmail.com

A great resource for caregivers, parents and families of LGBTQ youth. PFLAG promotes the health and well being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people; their families; and friends through support, education, and advocacy. They offer support groups for caregivers of LGBTQ youth and individuals.

**OUTreach – Ogden LGBTQ Drop-In Center** [ogdenoutreach.org](http://ogdenoutreach.org)
705 23rd Street, Ogden, UT 84401
(801) 686-4528
info@ogdenoutreach.org

The OUTreach drop-in center is open from 3:00 pm to 7:30 pm every Wednesday and Thursday. They serve youth aged 14-23, in the Weber, Davis, and Box Elder counties who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or just have questions about gender and sexuality.

**Volunteers of America, Utah – Homeless Youth Resource Center** [voaut.org](http://voaut.org)
655 South State Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84111
(801) 364-0744

The VOA Homeless Youth Resource Center delivers a continuum of services to homeless street youth through its Street Outreach Program, Drop-In Center and Transition Home.

National Resources to Support LGBTQ Youth

**The Family Acceptance Project** [familyproject.sfsu.edu](http://familyproject.sfsu.edu)

The Family Acceptance Project™ is the only community research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to decrease major health and related risks for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth – such as suicide, substance abuse, HIV and homelessness – in the context of their families. They use a research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially and religiously diverse families decrease rejection and increase support for their LGBT children.

**The National Center for Lesbian Rights** [nclr.org](http://nclr.org)

The National Center for Lesbian Rights is a national legal organization committed to advancing the civil and human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families through litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. NCLR has produced guidelines and best practices to meet the needs of LGBT youth in child welfare and juvenile justice settings.

**The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections** [hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp](http://hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp)

NRCFPC provides training and technical assistance to States and Indian Tribes on a wide variety of LGBTQ-related issues. To support States, NRCFPC has developed multiple, downloadable print resources on LGBTQ issues and child welfare that are available on the NRCPFC website.

**Child Welfare League of America** [cwla.org](http://cwla.org)

CWLA is a powerful coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies serving vulnerable children and families since 1920. Its expertise, leadership and innovation on policies, programs, and practices help improve the lives of millions of children in all 50 states. CWLA has published *The Best Practice Guidelines for serving LGBTQ Youth in Out of Home Care*.

**Gender Spectrum** [genderspectrum.org](http://genderspectrum.org)

Gender Spectrum provides education, training and support to help create a gender sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens. Gender Spectrum is an excellent resource for caregivers, families and professionals supporting transgender or gender non-conforming youth.

**GSA Network** [gsanetwork.org](http://gsanetwork.org)

GSA Network is a national organization that provides information, tools and training resources that are intended to support students who are wishing to start or strengthen a Queer or Gay-Straight Alliance club at their school.
The Keeping Kids Safe Campaign is coordinated by the Advocacy and Education Department of Utah Pride.

keepingkidssafe@utahpridecenter.org

www.utahpridecenter.org