Panel: The Experience of Transgender and Non-Binary Youth in Foster Care: Challenges and Ideas for Improvement

April 30, 2021
Child Abuse Prevention Month Virtual Speaker Series
Research has documented that LGBTQ youth of color are significantly overrepresented in child welfare and youth justice systems.

Once in government custody, these youth experience high levels of mistreatment and instability, leading to diminished life outcomes.

Many of these same youth cycle between foster care, carceral settings, psychiatric hospitals, and homelessness.
Recognizing Limits of Reform work

To date, reform efforts aimed at repairing these systemic failures have focused on developing professional standards and regulations, adopting agency nondiscrimination policies, and delivering cultural competency training to the agency workforce.

While, these efforts have succeed in raising awareness and created some standard of safety and welfare of LGBTQ youth in public custodial systems but it has fallen short of addressing the systems' historical and structural racist, sexist, and homophobic underpinnings, and the untold harms visited upon generations of children and families who have been subject to their reach.
How do we Reimagine a better future?

We need to raise the bar in Santa Clara County from ensuring “safety” and “tolerance” of LGBTQ youth of color to promoting their well-being and sense of belonging.
What is needed?

• **Access to necessities** that constitute the social determinants of health, including food security, stable housing, economic security, healthcare, quality education, transportation, and connection to one’s culture, family, and community.

• **Commitment to healing** the harm and trauma caused by structural racism, sexism, and heterosexism and embracing anti-racist, gender-affirming, and equity-driven attitudes, practices, and policies.

• **Opportunities for young people** to develop competence, take responsibility for their mistakes, and contribute to their communities.

• **A continuum of services** tailored to the unique needs of each young person and family, and accessible geographically, culturally, and practically.

• **A meaningful process** for youth and their families to lead decision-making processes that impact their lives.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must see the whole individual—interconnected and in relationship to families and communities.

We cannot combat isolation with more isolation. We need to build the supports and improve the conditions in all the spheres of influence. We need to normalize and celebrate complexity, seeing all the gifts/talents to address unique barriers.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must center the voices of transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming people.

The voices of TNBGNC people have been ignored and silenced for many years. It is important that they lead, participate, and shape the conversation.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must work toward equity, acknowledging a historic unleveled field.

Not only do we need to center TNBGNC POC voices, but their voices must outnumber all the other contributors who have already had the microphone for so long. Equity is not treating everyone the same; it's about justice, healing, and transformation. This type of change is difficult for bureaucracies.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must value lived experience as an essential expertise.

Those with lived experience as TNBGNC people have unique insights and are best positioned to identify system gaps, program inadequacies, and barriers in processes. It is a type of knowing that is acquired though a personal journey and in community relationship. It is essential to this work. This belief challenges power structures and hierarchies of knowledge.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must ground our work beyond compliance and toward transformation.

All youth deserve to be safe. Safety (physical, emotional, psychological, etc) should be the baseline and not the bar. To achieve that, we have to follow the laws AND go beyond so that we continuously act in the best interest of those most impacted---and they have a right to decide what is best for them.
How do we begin and engage in the conversation?

We must question embedded and longstanding assumptions as it helps us reveal system bias.

"That's the way it's been," is no longer an acceptable response. For example, why do we segregate by gender? What are the assumptions about sexual orientation, safety, and behavior? We need to be constantly checking our assumptions through dialogue, inquiry, and innovation.
In Santa Clara County

- 30.9% of LGB high school students seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year compared to 5.4% of their straight counterparts*

- 68% of LGB youth in public middle and high schools experienced bullying at school in the last year, compared to 27% of straight kids**

- 30% of Youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ,**

*WestEd, California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and Biennial State CHKS. California Dept. of Education

**WestEd, California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and Biennial State CHKS. California Dept. of Education (Mar. 2019).
In Santa Clara County

Only 31%
LGBTQ middle- and high-school students felt safe at home, school, and in their neighborhood.

Only 19%
LGBTQ middle- and high-school students showed high self-esteem.

Only 22%
LGBTQ middle- and high-school students reported positive family communication.
LGBTQ students asset level: VULNERABLE

Some alarming findings:
- LGBTQ youth average only 18 out of 40 assets as compared to 21.4 (Level ADEQUATE) for all students surveyed.
- They are 1.5x more likely to use drugs and alcohol.
- Only 11% feel valued by the community.
- LGBTQ youth are higher in 23 out of 24 Risk Behaviors.
- LGBTQ youth are lower in 6 out of 7 Thriving Indicators.
In Santa Clara County

100%
LGBTQ individuals are beautiful.

100%
LGBTQ individuals are talented, skilled, and a valuable member of our community.

100%
LGBTQ individuals are Resilient.

Testimonios and lived experience
Promote Wellbeing and Belonging
Recognizing Barriers to Permanency

- Child welfare systems take away Black and Brown children at a disproportionately high rate compared with White children and is then reluctant to send them home.
- Structural racism and LGBTQ stigma likely increase the risk that LGBTQ youth of color will enter these systems.
- Existing research finds that LGBTQ youth of color are overrepresented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Once in the system, LGBTQ youth of color tend to remain longer and face greater risk of discrimination and violence compared to their peers.
- One in five young people in U.S. juvenile justice facilities identify as LGBTQ, and 85% of these individuals are youth of color.
- Unjust treatment at the hands of law enforcement, court, immigration authorities and re-entry programs puts the lives and life chances of LGBTQ people of color at risk.
The Youth Acceptance Project

- Theory of Change: Early sensitive engagement and intervention with families can support change that make a significant impact on a family’s functioning and a lasting impact on the overall wellness of LGBQQ-T+GE-I youth.

- The Youth Acceptance Project works with the families of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ+) and gender expansive children and youth in foster care who struggle to accept and affirm their children.

- The intervention serves as a family preservation and family reunification tool.

- Clinicians use a trauma-informed, psycho-educational model to address the resistance, fear, grief and misinformation that families often struggle with; the result is families that become accepting and affirming of their children.

- This intervention prevents or reduces the time that children spend in foster care and reunites children with their families. Outcomes from this model have shown a decrease in youth’s suicidal behaviors and running away and shown a significant increase in the youth’s well-being. Parents and children have also reported considerable improvement in their relationship. For more info: YAP@familybuilders.org