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What are the best practices for  
supporting LGBTQ+ folks experiencing  
homelessness, particularly youth?

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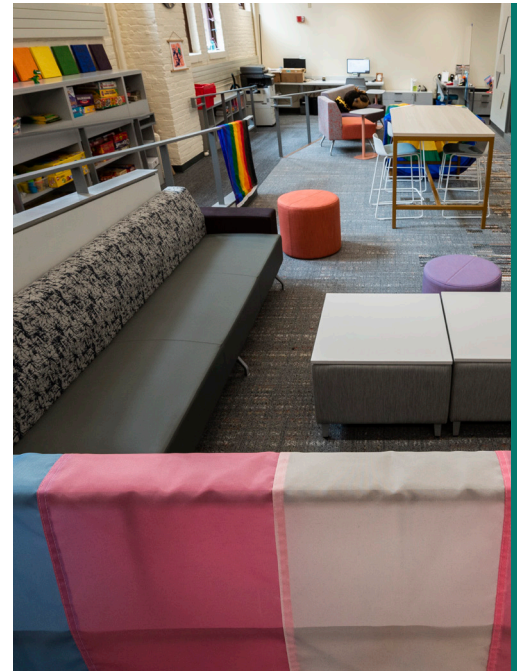
# Why do LGBTQ+ youth experience such high rates of homelessness?

Youth homelessness is a pervasive issue in cities across the country. Homelessness disproportionately affects members of marginalized groups, particularly members of the LGBTQ+ community and especially LGBTQ+ youth of color. According to [True Colors United](#), 40% of youth experiencing homelessness are members of the LGBTQ+ community despite making up only 7% of the general youth population. LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of homelessness because they are more likely to be rejected by their families and forced out of their home by parents and caregivers. Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth cite aging out of foster care, abuse at home, and family poverty as reasons for experiencing homelessness.

There are existing resources aimed at combating youth homelessness, but many are not LGBTQ+ specific. Non-LGBTQ+ specific shelters may perpetuate harm as many LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness report facing abuse, attacks, intentional misgendering, and hate crimes in shelters. Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness have unique needs. Many may need additional resources in terms of healthcare, mental health services, legal support, and emotional support. It is important for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness to have access to safe spaces that acknowledge and respect their identities so that they are not only safe from discrimination, but so that they can feel empowered.

Cities can support LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness by providing them with safe and supportive housing options and connecting them to resources. Many cities opt to partner with existing LGBTQ+ organizations in their city who have strong relationships with the LGBTQ+ community and offer them additional resources and funding through grants so that they can expand their work.

The [US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#) offers grants and training that cities may use to better serve LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in their communities. On June 8, 2023, HUD renewed their [LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative](#) which is expected to offer resources for cities in the coming months. According to HUD's press release the initiative will, "partner with local communities, service providers, and directly-affected young people to address barriers to housing and shelter access for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) youth."



# City Solutions:

## DETROIT, MICHIGAN

In 2022, Detroit opened the [Ruth Ellis Clairmount Center](#), a mixed-use development that provides permanent supportive housing for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. The center is the first of its kind in the Midwest. In addition to housing, the center offers social services, healthcare, and employment opportunities all within the building. The center holds 43 studio and one-bedroom apartments, 34 of which are covered by Section 8 project-based rental assistance. Eight units are unassisted, and one unit is an employee unit.

The building includes a resource library, technology center, career training and event space, community kitchen, salon, art studio, and health center. To provide healthcare at the center, the Clairmount Center has partnered with Henry Ford Health, a hospital that has served Detroit residents for over 100 years. Residents can receive care virtually from their apartment at the center or visit the clinic located on the first floor. Addiction and mental health counselors are also available on site at the center. Although the center is focused on supporting members of the LGBTQ+ community, others are welcome and able to access resources.

To build the Ruth Ellis Center, \$1 million in federal funding was used. Government leaders at all levels were instrumental in securing this funding. The City of Detroit's Housing & Revitalization Department (HRD) also assisted in receiving Low-Income Housing Tax Credits through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, and the land for the project was sold to the center by the Detroit Land Bank Authority.

The Ruth Ellis Center also offers several housing programs that are specific to LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Their Kelly Stough Project offers 6-24 months of rental support including relocation costs, security deposits, and utility assistance as well as case management services to connect youth with food, benefits, employment assistance and counseling. The Kelly Stough Project targets survivors of human trafficking. Finally, the Ruth Ellis Center offers a rapid re-housing program that offers 3-12 months of rental support including relocation costs, security deposits, and utility assistance as well as case management services to connect youth with food, benefits, employment assistance and counseling.

## BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Using HUD funds, Baltimore, MD [offers grants to local nonprofits](#) who support the housing and care of LGBTQ+ youth and adults experiencing homelessness. In 2021, [Mayor Scott announced](#) that HUD funding would be used to support a new transitional housing project to provide shelter for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. [Baltimore Safe Haven](#) is a trans-led organization that is LGBTQ+ specific. They offer a drop in center, [warming shelters](#) in the winter, and transitional housing resources. The transitional housing program allows residents to take GED prep courses or vocational training and they have access to legal support and HIV/STI testing. Safe Haven also offers a three-phase housing program where residents are eventually settled into a permanent housing unit. The [most recent Continuum of Care](#) for this program was announced in March of 2023.

## SHELBY COUNTY, TENNESSEE (MEMPHIS)

In April 2023, Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris announced an investment in transitional housing for transgender residents. [Shelby County Government invested nearly \\$200,000](#) in transitional housing at [My Sistah's House](#), an organization in Memphis that works to help house members of the LGBTQ+ community, with a focus on Black trans women. My Sistah's House [began in 2017](#) when two workers at OutMemphis, an LGBTQ+ community center in the city, wanted to address the needs of transgender residents experiencing homelessness. They began hosting people at their own homes, and with more funding they were able to open their own center and eventually build tiny homes for LGBTQ+ people in Memphis. Before My Sistah's House, there were only 71 beds available in emergency shelters across Memphis and none of those beds were designated for LGBTQ+ people. The funds from the county grant will allow My Sistah's House to increase the amount of transitional housing they offer that is specifically for LGBTQ+ people, especially trans women of color.

## LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

In partnership with Winterwood Property and grassroots nonprofit, [AVOL](#), Lexington opened [Stonewall Terrace](#), a 26-unit community residence that will serve low-income tenants. Tenants must have income below 60% of the area median income and priority is given to individuals with disabilities and those who are LGBTQ+. AVOL, an organization dedicated to ending HIV and AIDS, provides support including [education and healthcare](#) to tenants. Apartments will be \$700 per month, but vouchers and other subsidies are accepted.



## KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

\*While we could not find information linking this organization to the city, it is an example of a program that follows best practices. Cities should aim to fund programs like these.

[Bryant's Bridge](#) in Knoxville is an organization that works to provide safe, affordable, long-term housing to LGBTQ+ youth and connect them to resources. Bryant's Bridge follows a housing first model meaning residents get immediate access to permanent housing with no requirements. After residents are placed in housing, they begin to access supportive services such as addiction support services, education, and vocational training. The program is partnered with dozens of community partners who provide healthcare services, trans affirming services, mental health care, job and career services, and even community and spiritual connections.

# Best Practices for Shelters and Transitional Housing:

- **Make housing programs “low barrier.” A “Housing first” framework is best.** What may seem like arbitrary requirements for accessing housing may actually serve as barriers for LGBTQ+ youth trying to access housing. For example, age and sobriety requirements may prevent LGBTQ+ youth from accessing housing. It is unrealistic to assume that youth may achieve sobriety before first having access to stable housing. Furthermore, some shelter programs require that youth prove that they are literally homeless to access services which makes the programs inaccessible for youth who may be living with abusive families or couch surfing. Decreasing or removing such barriers can help LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness find housing.
- **Ensure shelter and transitional housing staff receive cultural competency training.** LGBTQ+ shelter residents are more likely to face harassment and abuse. Staff need to keep this in mind to ensure that residents are safe, respected, and have access to privacy.
- **Where possible, have private rooms and gender-neutral bathrooms. If this is not possible let LGBTQ+ residents select the dorm or bedroom they would like to stay in and the bathroom they would like to use.** HUD's Equal Access Rule prohibits discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in HUD funded shelter services. This rule mandates that transgender individuals be allowed to use the dorm and restroom facilities that align with their gender identity.

- **When possible, place LGBTQ+ youth in transitional housing or more private and permanent housing when they first reach out to providers.** Many LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness report feeling frustrated having to first stay at shelters in order to receive more permanent housing. Shelters can prove to be unsafe and traumatic experiences for LGBTQ+ youth. If possible, it is best to provide them with more permanent and private housing options right away.
- **Partner with existing local organizations and care providers to give access to a wide range of resources.** Many LGBTQ+ shelters and transitional housing programs partner with healthcare providers so that youth may access gender affirming care, STI testing, mental health services, legal services, and addiction treatment. One service that cities have also found useful to partner with are veterinary clinics for youth that have pets.
- **Ensure that shelters and transitional housing have confidentiality and nondiscrimination policies in place.** Even LGBTQ+ people who are “out” may not be out to every person in their lives. It is important to respect residents’ privacy and ensure their safety.

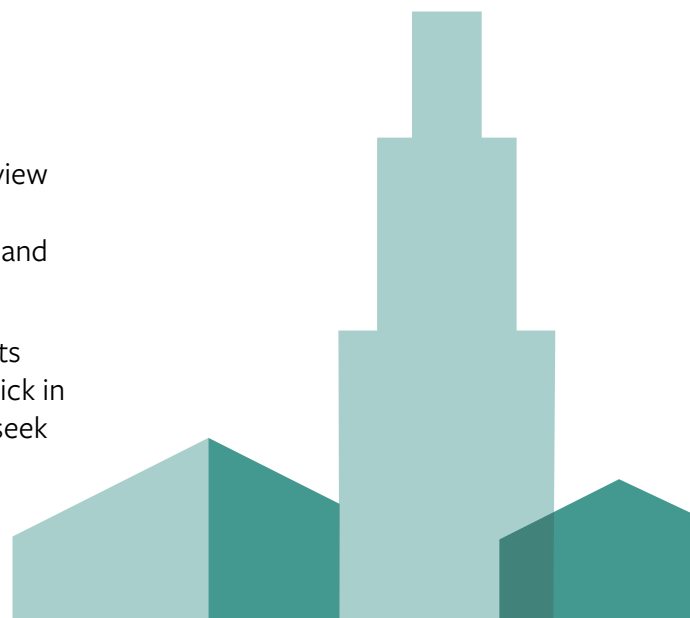


## Possible Limitations and Legal Constraints

As of January 1, 2023, there were 22 states that fully and explicitly prohibited discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Some states have [laws that protect against discrimination](#) based on sexual orientation. However, this coverage is lacking considerably when it comes to protecting against discrimination based on gender identity.

In 2020 the Supreme Court ruled in *Bostock v. Clayton County* that people in all states are entitled to seek recourse for employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, this ruling does not extend to discrimination in housing or public accommodations which are essential in the housing of LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness. It is important to review state nondiscrimination laws and when possible, implement local nondiscrimination ordinances that can fill in the gaps in the state and federal law.

Some states lack what is known as a [shield law](#) - a law that protects access to transgender healthcare. Recently there has been an uptick in bills being proposed in state legislatures across the country that seek



to ban gender-affirming care for transgender youth. So long as states lack shield laws, LGBTQ+ youth will continue to be threatened with the possibility that their healthcare could be taken away. This is something that local leaders must keep in mind, especially if your city offers healthcare resources to LGBTQ+ youth in supportive housing.

The [Runaway and Homeless Youth Act \(RHYA\)](#) provides grants to states that are aimed at helping youth experiencing homelessness access education, employment, savings, and family reconnection services. However, the act does not include any protections for LGBTQ+ youth.

## Alternative and Supplemental Programs and Policies that Achieve Supportive Outcomes:

**Host Homes:** Multiple cities host non-profits who oversee a network of host homes. Hosts are often unpaid volunteers who open their homes to LGBTQ+ youth seeking support and a place to stay. In Minneapolis, an organization called [ConneQT](#) screens and trains community members who have spare bedrooms and matches them with an LGBTQ+ youth who needs assistance. Host homes provide housing and food to youth while ConneQT offers access to resources such as education and career support. It is imperative that cities properly vet host homes to ensure that LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness receive safe and supportive care.

## More information on HUD's recent Initiative:

On June 8, 2023 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [launched an initiative](#) to address LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. This initiative will partner local communities, service providers, and directly affected young people with the federal government to address barriers that LGBTQ+ youth face as they try to access safe and affordable housing. HUD is expected to release a toolkit in the coming months on the best practices in supporting LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. HUD will also launch a training series for communities and providers on how to improve care for homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

This brief is part of a series of publications MIP has released that was originally researched and compiled as a technical assistance memo to a participating member city. This memo was written in 2023 in response to a specific research question submitted by that member city. To make this publicly available, we've removed references to the original request and any location-specific recommendations. MIP members are invited to please reach out to us at [knspear@mayorsinnovation.org](mailto:knspear@mayorsinnovation.org) to request their own policy memo on this or other topics.

For context, the original research question that prompted this memo was: What are the best practices for LGBTQ+ folks experiencing homelessness, particularly youth?

## About Mayors Innovation Project

The Mayors Innovation Project is a learning network among American mayors committed to “high road” policy and governance: shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. We are a project of High Road Strategy Center.



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