A CRISIS IN THE COMMUNITY: LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, & QUESTIONING HOMELESS YOUTH

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The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Advisory Committee of the City and County of San Francisco Human Rights Commission recently hosted a panel discussion regarding a crisis in San Francisco – the growing population of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) homeless youth.

LGBTQQ youth grow up in a culture in which they are bombarded by messages of heterosexism, transphobia, biphobia, and homophobia. LGBTQQ youth often hear and see these messages from families, schools, peers, movies, music, television, books, political organizations, newspapers, public figures, and religious institutions. Learning to feel ashamed, isolated, and fearful can prevent LGBTQQ youth from discovering who they are and may lead to depression, suicide, substance abuse, and lack of self-confidence. LGBTQQ youth need to feel safe, feel supported, and to know they are not alone.

Many LGBTQQ youth have been thrown out of their homes, made fun of and beaten up in schools, harassed and discriminated against on their jobs, and subjected to psychiatric abuse because of their sexual and gender identities. By running away to San Francisco where the LGBT community is renowned for its political, social and cultural success, they hope to find acceptance and safety. But too often the economic barriers to establishing themselves here prove initially insurmountable. Unwilling or unable to return to the rejecting homes and communities they left behind, they will stay without knowing where they will spend the night, when they will eat again, and whether they will need to sell their bodies for survival. Before long, new obstacles, e.g. drug use, disease, criminal records for "quality of life" offenses, may make their successful integration into the larger civic community more and more difficult to achieve. The legal and medical resources they require become more complex and costly, and the outcome by age 30 may be imprisonment, permanent medical disability, or death by violence, illness or suicide.

As detailed below, LGBTQQ youth often become homeless in San Francisco for a variety of reasons, among which are the lack of resources to assist them, exploitation by predators, substance abuse, lack of affordable housing, bureaucratic and financial barriers to health care,
and lack of self-esteem. The vulnerability of LGBTQQ youth is especially severe when they first arrive in San Francisco only to find that there are few resources for them. It is crucial that they receive support and resources right away so they can resist attempts at exploitation.

**CONCERNS**

Experts on LGBTQQ homeless youth recently presented testimony to the Human Rights Commission’s LGBT Advisory Committee. Additionally, the committee heard a significant number of personal experiences presented by homeless LGBTQQ youth residing in San Francisco. The testimony led to the Human Rights Commission identifying the following concerns:

1. Homeless LGBTQQ youth have few personal resources. They typically have little or no money, no family assistance, few possessions or clothing.

2. There are very few community or City resources dedicated to LGBTQQ homeless youth, and those are almost exclusively dedicated to teens. For young people 19 to 28, for whom shelter and employment are more pressing concerns even than education, no specific programs exist.

3. When homeless LGBTQQ youth are ready for personal change, whether to (a) conquer and overcome substance abuse, (b) go back to school, or (c) secure employment, it is critically important to assist them right away as soon as they arrive in San Francisco and while the desire and the trust are there.

4. Many of the problems encountered by LGBTQQ youth are the same problems as other homeless people, poor and working people, and young people; i.e., the prohibitively expensive cost of living in San Francisco.

5. San Francisco is a beacon for LGBTQQ youth, who often see the city as their only and last hope. They have fled domestic violence, abuse, hate crimes, and involuntary institutionalization.

6. Many LGBTQQ homeless youth acquire criminal records from just trying to survive. Once they become entangled in the juvenile justice and law enforcement systems, they are afraid that any action, any call for help, any attempt at confronting their demons, will lead them back into the hands of law enforcement. Hence they often will refuse assistance requiring measures such as registration and fingerprinting.

7. Adults sometimes take advantage of homeless and runaway youth, including exploiting them sexually and furnishing them with drugs.

8. Many LGBTQQ youth resort to sex work to survive. Sex work often is the only alternative given their unemployability because of lack of education and resources.
9. LGBTQQ homeless youth often suffer from illnesses including STDs, HIV, skin lesions and needle abscesses, and substance abuse. They sometimes have trouble receiving adequate and consistent care, and lack instruction, support, and resources for maintaining good health.

10. LGBTQQ youth have a higher risk of suicide than heterosexual youth.

11. LGBTQQ homeless youth often are targets for violence. The serious problem in San Francisco of violence against the LGBT communities is worse for homeless youth who are visible and often looked down on, and who lack trust in law enforcement as a means of protection.

12. Homeless LGBTQQ youth face many challenges in securing and maintaining employment. They often lack training and education, do not have proper clothing for interviews, do not own tools or supplies required by some employers, and have trouble getting to an interview or job on time due to being homeless.

13. Barriers faced by homeless LGBTQQ youth in finding a place to live in the expensive San Francisco housing market include lack of funds for deposits and monthly rent, lack of legal emancipation for those under 18, and landlord bias.

14. LGBTQQ homeless youth in the Castro are residents of the Castro. There are some residents and merchants in the Castro neighborhood, as in any neighborhood in San Francisco, who only recognize residency for people with homes.

15. LGBTQQ youth usually do not feel safe at adult homeless shelters because they fear becoming targets of violence, harassment, sexual assault, and thievery.

16. There is no drop-in or temporary facility in the Castro for LGBTQQ youth. Attempts at creating such facilities have been met with resistance from some Castro merchants and residents.

17. Services that exist for LGBTQQ youth, including Dimensions, Ark House, Metropolitan Community Church, Most Holy Redeemer Church, and LYRIC have very limited funding and ability to serve LGBTQQ homeless youth.

18. LGBTQQ homeless youth usually do not feel welcome and safe at community youth service providers in San Francisco. Many of the experiences they suffered in their hometown schools, such as being made fun of and becoming targets of bullies, are duplicated in youth programs.

19. Many LGBTQQ homeless youth take crystal methamphetamine to stay awake all night, being afraid to sleep when it’s dark because of theft and sexual assault.
20. Though substance abuse treatment on demand is crucial for recovery, it is rarely available in San Francisco.

21. Residential treatment for substance abuse, when it can be found, is usually a 30-, 60-, or 90-day program. Because of the extremely limited availability of longer-term transitional housing, homeless youth post-treatment are likely to find themselves on the streets again, subject to the same conditions and pressures that gave rise to their drug use in the first place.

22. Transgender homeless youth face additional discrimination, lack of understanding, and lack of services, especially those affording privacy in showering and dressing.

23. Transgender homeless youth need medical advice and assistance. They often take hormones they bought on the streets and administer themselves.

24. Many services are segregated by sex, creating unsafe situations for transgender youth.

25. LGBTQQ homeless youth lack safe opportunities for socialization. Homelessness often leads to isolation, especially from other LGBTQQ youth.

26. LGBTQQ homeless youth lack safe and secure places to store their belongings.

27. Housing, medical care, job training, and employment opportunities especially are needed.

28. LGBTQQ homeless youth suffer multiple oppressions, including lack of housing and regular meals, exploitation, lack of education and social services, poor health, and substance abuse. They must go to numerous locations to access services, since currently none is specific or comprehensive.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To alleviate these conditions, the Human Rights Commission recommends the following:

1. Provide beds in facilities in various neighborhoods, particularly the Castro, Polk Gulch, the Tenderloin, and the Mission, for emergency use by LGBTQQ youth who have nowhere to sleep.

2. Create transitional housing for LGBTQQ youth in the Castro, to include beds, storage lockers, showers, and social, medical, educational, and rehabilitation services. This will involve securing funding (city, state, and federal) and grants. A suitable building must be found. Cooperation and support of Castro merchants and residents must be secured. The goal will be re-entry into independent living.
3. Provide education and training for homeless LGBTQ youth. It is crucial that these young people receive the education and training they need to secure employment and opportunity. Classes, job readiness training (interviewing, dressing, etc.), skill building, seminars, apprenticeships, and GED preparation are examples of educational programs that are crucial.

4. Educate the LGBT community that LGBTQ youth, including homeless youth, are part of the LGBT community, deserve its support and respect, and need adult mentors and role models. Creative solutions that assist LGBTQ homeless youth while at the same time making them feel welcome in the Castro and other communities is good for the youth, good for their neighbors, and good for business.

5. Developing mentoring programs within the LGBT communities.

6. Create programs for LGBTQ youth in “life skills,” e.g., how to survive economically, how to live successfully with housemates, how to honor commitments, how to manage a bank account, how to interview for a job, how to dress for a job or a job interview, how to manage health and safety, how to combat loneliness, how to achieve greater confidence and self-esteem, etc.

7. Provide greater avenues for LGBTQ youth to live in foster homes with LGBT and LGBT-sensitive foster parents.

8. Include LGBTQ youth with emergency needs in transitional housing programs.

9. Increase outreach efforts to LGBTQ homeless youth for services that are available.

10. Create group homes and train LGBTQ youth to run them.

11. While transitional housing is being planned for and being built, respond to the immediate, current, and short-term needs of LGBTQ homeless youth.

12. Work with the LGBT Community Center to augment services for LGBTQ homeless youth; e.g., offering lockers.

13. Increase sensitivity of youth services programs regarding LGBTQ youth, and create zero-tolerance policies for homophobia and transphobia for employees and participants.

14. Provide magazines and posters with LGBTQ imagery and materials in waiting rooms and treatment offices in youth services program facilities.

15. Educate the LGBT communities about the serious problems of sexual and drug exploitation of youth.

16. Provide training to LGBT youth, including those who are homeless, in how to resist sexual exploitation and drug abuse.
17. Secure more funding for substance abuse treatment on demand, including youth-specific programs and dedicated beds for youth in existing programs that are not age-specific.

18. Assure that services such as rest rooms are available for LGBTQQ homeless youth while construction is taking place at the Eureka Valley Recreation Center.

19. Assure that abscesses and skin lesions receive thorough attention and follow-up care at San Francisco General Hospital, especially in light of the increasing prevalence of communicable antibiotic-resistant staph infections.

20. Appoint a San Francisco Police Department liaison to the youth population in neighborhoods such as the Castro, Polk Gulch, and Tenderloin.