

# Invisible in Plain Sight

## LGBT Homeless Youth Finding Long-awaited Support

by Diana Scholl

When Christopher Thomas' mother entered a cancer center to be treated for leukemia, she reluctantly sent Thomas to live with his grandfather in Ohio. Though nervous, Thomas, then 18, was looking on the bright side. "It was near Ohio State University. I figured if I lived there for an entire year I could go to OSU for college and pay in-state tuition," he says.

During a Greyhound bus delay in Cincinnati, Thomas' cell phone rang. It was his grandfather. "He asked me a bunch of weird questions that were irrelevant. Then he asked if I was gay," Thomas remembers. "I said 'Of course.' I'd been out since I was 10. My mom was fine with it, and it hadn't been an issue."

On the phone with his grandfather, Thomas overheard his aunt in the room say, "That's a sin. We can't have that here. He deserves to be homeless." Thomas didn't know what to do. "All through Cincinnati, I was crying real bad. I felt like my entire life took a sour turn," he says.

Thomas ended up in California, where he was fortunate to find housing at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, which provides transitional housing for those ages 18 to 24, and specifically targets LGBT youth.

"The Gay & Lesbian Center is like my family now. Any time I need help with anything I have people I can go to," says Thomas, 19. He is a senior in high school, and wants to attend San Francisco State University next year.

"I used to feel so bitter," he says. "But I know my education is important, and there is so much I can give to the world. That's the thing that keeps me sane and gives me hope for the future."

It is estimated that 1.6 million youth under 18 are homeless or are runaways each year. More than half of these youth experienced

violence at home. Many are former foster children, who aged out of the system. And a disproportionate number are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) young people like Thomas.

In places where homeless youth have been asked their sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBT youth have been found to be overrepresented. The Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center found that 40 percent of homeless youth in Hollywood are LGBT, while for San Francisco the figure was 30%, according to Larkin Street Youth Services.

According to the comprehensive 2006 report *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness* by the Gay and Lesbian Taskforce and the National Coalition on Homelessness, LGBT homeless youth are at increased risk of abusing substances, engaging in risky sexual behavior, and suffering from depression and other mental health issues. They are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of violence.

The lack of funding for all homeless youth is alarming—in 2009 just \$118 million in federal dollars went to support and provide housing for this population. And currently no specific money is targeted toward LGBT homeless youth.

Despite the uphill battle, the struggles of LGBT youth like Thomas are gaining wider attention at the national level. And in less concrete ways, the federal government is acknowledging LGBT youth. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness has acknowledged the problems unique to LGBT youth, and now includes LGBT-specific information in its training and

technical assistance for Runaway and Homeless Youth Program grantees. This year, in an attempt to prevent future homelessness, the Department of

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Health and Human Services (HHS) started funding a \$3 million dollar pilot program to provide support to LGBT youth and their families in the child welfare system.

“There’s a push to give programs the tools they need to be more inclusive,” says Andre Wade, youth program and policy analyst at the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “The federal government is very aware that this population exists.”

Still, LGBT-specific housing is rare, with fewer than 25 LGBT-specific housing options across the country. But that number is expanding. Most recently, singer Cyndi Lauper’s “True Colors Residence” supportive housing opened this September in New York City. Named after Lauper’s 1986 hit song, the residence is the first permanent supportive housing for LGBT youth in New York State, and has drawn increased attention to the plight of LGBT youth. Away from the media spotlight, many shelters and services that work with all homeless teenagers and young adults are also providing additional outreach to LGBT youth.

“It’s exciting that people are really interested and paying attention,” says Jama Shelton, coordinator of research, evaluation, and training at the Ali Forney Center in New York City, which conducts federally funded trainings for providers of services to homeless LGBT youth throughout the country. “Years ago the questions were more ‘Are people born this way?’ or ‘Do you think gay marriage should be legal?’ Now the conversation has moved to where we can say, ‘What matters is the here and now.’”

Suggestions to providers include using respectful language when talking to and about LGBT youth, allowing transgender youth to stay in the shelter where they feel most comfortable regardless of the gender on their birth certificates, and ending harassment by staff and other shelter residents.

## Family Ties

Based on anecdotal evidence, it is believed that LGBT youth come from their hometowns to traditionally LGBT-friendly cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Michelle McKeever is one such person.

When McKeever’s stepfather kicked her out of their home in Mobile, Ala., at age 18, McKeever, a transgender woman, spent the night in a shed outside Home Depot. After her grandfather gave her money for bus fare to New York, she bounced around—overstaying her welcome with cousins, and spending the night in a men’s shelter, before finally landing at the Ali Forney Center’s transitional housing for LGBT homeless youth. That move changed her life.

“Ali Forney gave me my backbone,” McKeever, 20, says. “They were there for me when I needed it, through the depression and

suicidal stage. I met a lot of other people, and a lot more friends than I had in my hometown. They made me feel like it matters that I’m still in this world. Now I am strong, steady, balanced. I’ll get depressed, but I don’t have suicidal attempts. I don’t let death get the upper hand.”

McKeever has recently started talking to her family again, after three years of estrangement. “I’m trying to reconnect and restart with them. Family is forever,” she says. “They are not going to go away.”

Maintaining or rebuilding family ties is one of the most important goals for programs that work with homeless youth.

“What we want ultimately is that when they’re 35 years old, [LGBT youth] can be reasonably assured they have somewhere to go for Thanksgiving,” says Curtis Shepard, director of children, youth, and family services at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center.

The L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center has long worked with LGBT young adults 18 years and older, and in April received a \$13.3 million, five-year grant from the federal Department of Health

*Named after singer and activist Cindy Lauper’s 1986 hit song, the True Colors Residence is the first permanent supportive housing for LGBT youth in New York State, and has drawn increased attention to the plight of homeless LGBT youth nationally. It opened in September 2011.*



and Human Services to provide support to children in the child welfare system.

“They are basically the same population that comes to us when they are 18, just further downstream, more damaged and challenged,” Shepard says.

The first of its kind, this grant is attempting to address the underlying issues LGBT youth face that lead to homelessness. The grant targets both self-identified LGBT youth, and those whose family problems are a result of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, an eight-year-old girl who is abused by her parents for wanting to wear boys’ clothes would qualify for intervention.

While this project is still in its research stage, the goal is to provide eligible families with additional counseling and services geared toward parental acceptance of children, in the hope of keeping families together. If that fails, according to Shepard, the next-best solution is for children to live with other family members, or in another permanent, loving home.

“We want to reduce the number of years these youth are languishing in the foster care system, so they don’t show up on our doorstep homeless at the age of 18 or 20,” Shepard says.

## Preparing for Independence

Because family reunification is not always possible, shelters and other programs that work with homeless young people attempt to provide emotional support, teach skills necessary for independent living, and offer adult role models.

“Life skills, like learning how to fry an egg, is something you learn from someone,” says Laura Hughes, executive director of the Ruth Ellis Center in Highland Park, Mich., which houses LGBT homeless youth up to age 24. “We try to expand the number of mentors and friends who are not predators. We have to build those networks.”

Ruth Ellis Center specifically brings in LGBT adults who have achieved professional success. When a gay small-business owner addressed the crowd, one of the young people said, “I didn’t know gay people owned businesses.”

“They need both the opportunity and possibility,” Hughes says.

Krystina Edwards, 18, is one of Ruth Ellis Center’s success stories. Her mother was addicted to drugs and kicked Edwards out after a fight. At age 16, Edwards was homeless for two months. “I had to do prostitution to make sure I could have a roof over my head,” says Edwards, a transgender woman.



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Local Child Protective Services got involved, and Edwards was referred to the Ruth Ellis Center, where she has lived for two years, and where she also currently works as an administrative assistant. She found the life skills class immeasurably helpful.

“They taught me how to balance my checkbook, how to do my own laundry. They taught me how to communicate with people, and how to dress for a job interview,” she says. “I have more faith in myself. Every day I wake up and come to work. It’s been a helping hand. This has been a life-changing experience.”

Edwards expects to get her GED this month, and wants to become an endocrinologist. She says, “I want to help other transgender women.”

## Looking to the Future

Soon the federal government will be providing some more help to groups like the Ruth Ellis Center. In April, HHS announced it will provide the first federal grants to LGBT-specific housing providers. The request for proposals is expected to be released in November.

But even with federal funding, the number of beds specifically for LGBT youth is outstripped by the incredible demand. So advocates are working to ensure all housing and services are welcoming.

“There’s very little LGBT-only housing,” Wade says. “We want to make sure that everything is inclusive.” ■