



Administration for Children's Services LGBTQAI+
Action Plan

NYC Children

JANUARY 2021

This ACS Action Plan is dedicated to the memory of Lisa Parrish, a dedicated advocate, former ACS Deputy Commissioner, and an inspiration to all who knew and worked with her.

The New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), its contracted foster care agencies and other key partners in NYC who specialize in working with LGBTQAI+ youth are committed to providing high quality services and improving outcomes for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care. Based on this commitment, and with generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, NYC Unity Project, New Yorkers for Children, and the Redlich Horwitz Foundation, with the assistance of Columbia University and Westat, ACS commissioned a survey study to understand the proportion of youth in foster care in New York City who are LGBTQAI+ and to compare their experiences in care with youth who are not LGBTQAI+.

ACS has policies and practices intended to protect the safety of these youth, and to support and affirm their self-identity in their relationships with adults and peers. ACS sought to conduct this important survey because we recognized that the field needed more comprehensive information about LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care in New York City in order to be effective. We needed to know what proportion of youth in foster care are LGBTQAI+ and to learn directly from youth in foster care about their experiences and sense of well-being. We also recognize that our current policies were developed almost ten years ago, and we know there are likely gaps between our intentions and the resources available, and what youth describe their experiences to be. Finally, there are changes in the worldview of the next generation of LGBTQAI+ youth in terms of how they understand and describe their sexual and gender identities, and ACS wants to build the field’s capacity to strongly affirm their self-understanding and their hard-won progress in defining themselves in the world.

This was the first analysis of the proportion of youth in foster care in New York City who are LGBTQAI+ and their differences in experiences compared to those of youth who are not LGBTQAI+. (The acronym LGBTQAI+ comprises persons who because of their gender and sexuality have specific needs and are treated differently than other persons, which might negatively affect their well-being. The letters stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, agender or asexual, and intersex).

According to the results:

- **LGBTQAI+ youth are overrepresented in foster care.** More than one out of three youths (34.1%), ages 13-20, in New York City foster care identify as LGBTQAI+. This is substantially higher than the proportion of LGBTQAI+ youth in the general population.
- **LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care are more frequently youth of color.** With almost three quarters of the sample identifying as African-American/Black and almost a third identifying as Latinx, the sample reflects the population of New York City youth in foster care, in which people of color are disproportionately represented. Within this already racially and ethnically disproportionate group, LGBTQAI+ youth are more likely to be Latinx and slightly more likely to be African-American/ Black.

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- **The placements of LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care are often different than that of non-LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care.** Compared to non-LGBTQAI+ youth, LGBTQAI+ youth were more likely to be placed in group homes or residential care and less likely to be placed in family-based care. Also, LGBTQAI+ youth were less satisfied with their current placement. LGBTQAI+ youth were more likely to say that they experienced little to no control over their lives in foster care and to have heard staff or other people refer to them as “hard to place.”
 - **The family experiences of LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care can be challenging.** While LGBTQAI+ youth were more likely to be in touch with family members, they saw these family members less frequently. Furthermore, LGBTQAI+ youth experienced family members as less supportive than non-LGBTQAI+ youth did. Fewer LGBTQAI+ youth reported that there were adults in their lives, other than family members, who they could rely on and with whom they felt supported.
 - **LGBTQAI+ young people have more struggles with institutional systems and higher risk factors for depression.** LGBTQAI+ youth had been absent without permission from their foster care placements for significantly more days than non-LGBTQAI+ youth; they also were more likely to have been homeless and to have had negative confrontations with the police. In addition, LGBTQAI+ youth were more likely to have been criticized for behaving and for dressing too much like the other sex. These risk factors were associated with differences in well-being: LGBTQAI+ youth reported to experience more depressive symptoms and fewer feelings of optimism compared to non-LGBTQAI+ youth.

ACS WORK TO DATE SUPPORTING LGBTQAI+ YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

ACS recognizes the unique needs of LGBTQAI+ youth through specific policies and programmatic requirements, and by providing targeted services designed to achieve positive safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for these young people and their families. ACS has a demonstrated history of commitment to equity practices and continues to strengthen policies and practices aimed at improving the overall health and well-being of LGBTQAI+ young people in its care. This section describes ACS’ work to date supporting LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care.

POLICY

The first ACS first full time LGBTQ Coordinator served in the position from 2008-2012 and worked with a committee that promulgated the agency’s first policies in this area. In 2012, ACS established the Office of LGBTQ Policy and Practice to support the development and implementation of affirming policies, training curriculum, best practices for LGBTQ youth in care. Also in 2012, ACS adopted an agency wide LGBTQAI+ youth and families in care policy. The policy requires that LGBTQAI+ youth have access to gender appropriate bedrooms/ bathrooms and gender appropriate grooming/hygiene products. Contracted provider agencies must recruit and support foster homes that are LGBTQAI+ affirming. The policy provides workers with engagement best practices to family interaction and maintaining youth confidentiality.

Often times, systems- involved LGBTQAI+ young people enter foster care with histories of physical abuse, bullying, conversion therapy, and racial oppression. The resulting traumas can result in youth adopting survival mechanisms that are self-harming. As per ACS policy, LGBTQAI+ identified youth entering New York City's foster care system are educated about their rights in care. This includes the ACS Non-Medicaid Reimbursable Policy which states all youth are entitled to health care that Medicaid will not pay for that includes hormone therapy and gender affirming surgeries. In addition, the ACS Foster Care Sexual Reproductive Health Policy declares that all LGBTQAI+ youth have the right to confidential sexual and reproductive health information and services that include HIV/STI testing, access to PrEP/PEP services, and OB/GYN care. Culturally responsive mental health services are critical to supporting youth in care. As standard practice, ACS and its contracted provider agencies refer youth to culturally responsive mental health providers.

OFFICE OF EQUITY STRATEGIES

In 2017, ACS created an Office of Equity Strategies, which works directly to identify strategies to reduce inequities, implicit bias and other factors that contribute to disparate outcomes for the families and communities served by ACS. Within this office, ACS has a dedicated LGBTQ Equity Strategies Director who is responsible for policy, best practices and guidance for serving LGBTQAI+ children, youth and families engaged with ACS, and helping make sure that the agency treats all youth and families equitably and compassionately regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression. The Office Equity Strategies also investigates allegations of LGBTQAI+ discriminatory practices and implements corrective actions as appropriate.

STAFF TRAINING AND RESOURCES

ACS staff are held to the highest standards for non-discriminatory practices and culturally competent engagement of LGBTQAI+ youth. To support ACS staff and contracted provider agencies, ACS provides trainings and knowledge tools on policies and best practices. ACS requires all ACS staff to take an implicit bias training as well as a one-day LGBTQAI+ training. Staff are also strongly encouraged to take the Transgender and Gender Non-Binary (TGNB) training. ACS staff are expected to have a fundamental knowledge of the ACS LGBTQAI+ youth in care policy. ACS also provides a version of these trainings to new ACS Child Protective Specialists (CPS) who conduct child abuse and neglect investigations and new Youth Development Specialists (YDS) who work in the juvenile justice system as part of their onboarding, in addition to offering refresher trainings to existing CPS and YDS staff.

ACS also requires contracted foster care agencies to provide their staff with a one-day LGBTQAI+ training and offers a one-day TGNB training, which is strongly encouraged. Both trainings use a train-the-trainer model.

Contracted foster care agencies are mandated to submit annual training data on LGBTQAI+/TGNB trainings for staff and foster parents to ACS. All foster care provider agencies are mandated to assign a staff person to be their designated LGBTQAI+/TGNB training liaison. This group informs ACS of emerging training needs and acts as a communication hub for issues LGBTQAI+ youth in care are experiencing.

ACS developed the Safe and Respected Guide, which provides best practices for direct service workers engaging transgender and gender non-binary youth involved in ACS systems. The guide is disseminated to ACS staff and foster care agencies.

ACS funds, in partnership with the NYC Unity Project, The Center and the Gender and Family Project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family (<https://genderandfamilyproject.org/>) to provide trainings to clinicians that work with youth and families in ACS systems. Both trainings provide clinicians with tools and techniques for working LGBTQAI+/TGNB youth and their families.

Lastly, ACS is always seeking and exploring ways to improve outcomes for youth and families, as well as opportunities to improve agency policies, practices and procedures. It was in this context that ACS sought this survey to better understand LGBTQAI+ youth experiences in the foster care system and then develop action steps to address the findings.

ACS LGBTQAI+ ACTION PLAN

As noted above, ACS sought to conduct this important survey because we **recognized that we and the field needed more comprehensive information about LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care in in order to be most effective.** Youth who shared their experiences demonstrated that systems need to do better and be better for the mental, emotional, physical well-being of LGBTQAI+ youth in care. The survey demonstrates the extent to which LGBTQAI+ youth are disproportionate to LGBTQAI+ youth in New York City overall. It also documents the disparities between LGBTQAI+ youth in care and non-LGBTQAI+ youth in care in their experiences and outcomes. Disparities that African-American and Latinx youth and families experience in the child welfare system are exacerbated when youth do not conform to traditional norms of sexual orientation and gender expression.

ACS is committed to implementing targeted strategies that respond to the survey findings in order to improve the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQAI+ youth in care. This section describes ACS' goals moving forward and identifies our specific action plan.

GOALS

Improving outcomes and increasing equity for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster requires a focus on three systemwide goals:

- Decrease unnecessary entries of LGBTQAI+ youth into foster care with a focus on addressing barriers to inclusion and equity to reduce disproportionate entries based on race and ethnicity.
- Increase placements with relatives and foster families/reduce placements in group homes and institution for LGBTQAI+ youth who must enter foster care.
- Improve well-being of LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care, regardless of race or ethnicity, including, for example, measures of placement stability; positive, supportive connections with parents and family members; reports of depression and permanency outcomes.

ACTION STEPS

ACS is currently taking steps outlined in its agency-wide Equity Action Plan that will support our goals to reduce racial disproportionality in foster care. The Plan includes actions to reduce disproportionate entries based on race and ethnicity, for example, and to increase efforts to place youth with kin. These efforts are intended to limit system involvement for all youth of color, including LGBTQAI+ youth.

To improve the experiences and outcomes for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care, ACS is implementing additional actions. These actions will be informed by anti-racist, culturally competent, trauma informed, and strengths-based perspectives.

- 1. ACS is updating the current LGBTQAI+ Youth in Care Policy.** The Office of Equity Strategies is working with ACS staff, provider agencies, stakeholders, advocates, and youth to ensure the newest version is comprehensive, data informed, intersectional in its lens, and culturally responsive to the needs of youth. The results of the survey will help to inform language, best practices, and protocol stated in the new version of the LGBTQ+ Youth in Care Policy.
- 2. ACS is revising and strengthening staff training on LGBTQAI+ issues.** For the past six months, the ACS Office of Training and Workforce Development has been working with the Office of Equity Strategies to enhance our approach to training around LGBTQAI+ issues. We are now developing a combined training merging the LGBTQAI+ and TGNB training into one two-day training. This two-day training will be provided directly to all contracted provider agency staff, Child Protection Specialists, and Youth Development Specialists, instead of a train-the-trainer model, and will be required for all staff. In the meantime, the ACS Workforce Institute has developed a virtual training refresher, currently available to all staff. This training is serving as a placeholder until the combined course noted above is available and ensures that staff receive support in work with LGBTQAI+ youth even while working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The new enhanced trainings will take an intersectional approach also looking at the confluence of race, ethnicity, and culture.
- 3. ACS is increasing services and supports for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care.** ACS recognizes that additional targeted therapeutic capacity is needed to build higher levels of support for youth and families. ACS plans to increase its support with more robust therapeutic services for foster parents/kinship caregivers by expanding work with the Ackerman Institute. Youth, parents, kinship caretakers, and foster parents referred for family therapy will also have access to other services that Ackerman's Gender Family Project (GFP) offers, including support groups for the whole family. GFP has offered virtual groups during the COVID-19 pandemic with separate spaces for youth and caregivers to gather with peers as they navigate the challenges of moving through a cis-normative culture. GFP will also offer an additional group available only to foster care parents so that their unique concerns can be addressed in a communal setting. ACS is also expanding training services for foster parents.
- 4. ACS will form a dedicated LGBTQAI+ Committee as part of the ACS Youth Leadership Council.** This group of youth in care will act as representatives for other LGBTQAI+ youth in ACS care as it relates to practices and practices. The Council will meet with ACS staff to discuss emerging needs.

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5. **ACS will work with foster care providers to expand recruitment targeting foster parents who would be interested in fostering the LGBTQAI+ youth population and to expand foster parent training for serving these young people.** ACS will utilize best practices for recruitment, training and support, and establish and track measurable goals for placing LGBTQAI+ youth with affirming foster families. ACS will work with Planned Parenthood of New York create and implement a relevant and engaging training program for foster parents to help them gain supportive knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will allow them to build affirming spaces for the LGBTQAI+ youth in their care.
 6. **ACS will be conducting further studies moving forward,** including adding questions pertaining to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) to its annual Youth Experience Survey and conducting a needs assessment for LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care that will measure and quantify specific needs, gaps, and resources needed to ensure LGBTQAI+ youth in the ACS systems have better outcomes in placement(s) and in aftercare.
 7. **ACS will advocate for, support and protect the implementation of LGBTQAI+ affirming policies and practices.** ACS will create opportunities to share its experiences, the results of this survey, the ACS Action Plan, and our practices with other local jurisdictions and to help advance this work locally, statewide and nationally. ACS will also collaborate with national advocacy organizations to protect and affirm LGBTQAI+ youth in foster care.

