

**Testimony from NYC Unity Project
Executive Director Ronald Porcelli**

***Ensuring Access to Supports for Transgender, Gender Non-conforming, and Nonbinary
(TGNCNB) People in New York City***

Committee on Women and Gender Equity | Friday, February 28, 2025 – 12:00 PM

Chair Louis, members of the Committee on Women and Gender, distinguished members of the City Council, and the public: good afternoon. I am Ronald Porcelli, Executive Director of the NYC Unity Project. I am grateful to the New York City Council and the Committee on Women and Gender for hosting this hearing today.

The NYC Unity Project is the city's LGBTQ+ interagency coordinating body, housed in the Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice. As an innovation hub of novel programming, the NYC Unity Project ("Unity Project") coordinates across city agencies to incubate culturally competent services tailored to meet the needs of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly TGNCNB people, people of color, and youth. The Unity Project works across three main sectors: economic mobility, acceptance and anti-discrimination, and health equity.

The Unity Project implements programming through a community-driven approach, investing in community-based organizations, and developing strategic partnerships across the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and academia. Beyond fostering culturally competent services, the Unity Project focuses on four additional pillars: interagency coordination, community engagement and education, policy and protections, and resource access.

NYC government has taken enormous strides to uplift and support the TGNCNB community, and the wider LGBTQ+ community. After centuries of discrimination and persecution, the past few decades have seen extraordinary advances in equity for TGNCNB folks, beginning here at the birthplace of Stonewall, where a rebellion ignited a movement that liberated countless individuals from shame, ostracization, and persecution—both in New York City and across the globe. We have witnessed a profound push for greater rights, protections, and services for LGBTQ+ people.

Yet, the work is far from over. We persist—navigating evolving challenges and confronting gaps that remain. We will continue to approach these needs with compassion, commitment, and empathy. We look forward to this hearing, the opportunity to speak before the council, and candid, thoughtful public testimony.

Policy & Protections:

Frist, with regards to policies and protections, the robust protections of the **New York City Human Rights Law (NYCHRL)** prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and gender expression in employment, housing, and public accommodations. The law safeguards employment rights related to sexual and

reproductive health, including gender-affirming care and hormone therapy. To uphold these protections, the New York City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) enforces the Human Rights Law through a combination of investigations, legal action, settlements, penalties, and public education.

LGBTQ+ individuals deserve respectful, high-quality, and culturally affirming health care without fear of discrimination or bias. Knowing and understanding their rights is essential to ensuring they can access care, services, and support. To uphold these rights, the Health Department developed the **LGBTQ+ Health Care Bill of Rights**, a critical initiative that outlines local and state protections designed to empower community members in advocating for their health and well-being. This bill of rights, available in multiple languages, serves as a tool for awareness and action, reinforcing that health care providers and staff are legally obligated to treat LGBTQ+ individuals with dignity and equity.

No one should face barriers, stigma, or substandard care due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. By championing this, we strive to create a health care system that is inclusive, affirming, and accessible to all, ensuring that people receive the compassionate, comprehensive, and affirming care they deserve. Utilizing Unity Project support, efforts are underway to assess its effectiveness, enhance its reach, and make necessary revisions.

Similarly, the **Non-Discrimination Policy** of the New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) ensures that all students can learn in a safe and supportive environment, free from harassment, intimidation, bullying, and discrimination based on actual or perceived classes, including gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. NYCPS is committed to upholding inclusivity and protecting all students, ensuring that school environments are welcoming to all.

To further support TGNCNB students, the **NYCPS Guidelines on Gender Inclusion** provide a clear framework of best practices and protocols for school-based and central office staff. These guidelines help foster understanding, inclusivity, and respect for TGNCNB students while ensuring they receive the same rights and protections as all students. As part of this commitment, NYCPS mandated that every NYC school must have single-occupancy restrooms available to provide privacy and comfort for students of all gender identities.

In the child welfare and juvenile justice sectors, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) upholds its **Non-Discrimination Policy** to protect LGBTQ+ youth and families. Its core policy, **Promoting a Safe and Respectful Environment for LGBTQAI+ Youth and Their Families**, mandates inclusive, discrimination-free environments in child welfare and juvenile detention systems. Additionally, ACS provides **Trans Health-Related Policy & Guidance** to facilitate affirming health care, including coverage for services not reimbursable by Medicaid.

Similarly, the Department of Homeless Services (**DHS Policy on Serving Transgender, Nonbinary, and Intersex Clients**) aims to close service gaps for clients of all gender identities experiencing homelessness, with a focus on respectfully accommodating clients who identify as transgender, non-binary, and intersex. DHS is committed to a policy of respect for all individuals and does not tolerate discrimination based on gender identity or expression. No one will be denied access to a gender-affirming facility or program because of their sex assigned at birth. DHS makes every effort to place clients where they feel safe, and where staff can ensure appropriate, affirming, and culturally competent services.

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community continue to face disproportionate rates of HIV and other STIs, making access to affirming and culturally responsive sexual health care essential. The Health Department launched the **New York City 2020 Ending the HIV Epidemic Plan**, a community-driven roadmap developed through a year-long planning process. This plan guides innovative, equity-focused HIV and sexual health initiatives that address social and structural factors driving disparities. It also prioritizes key populations most impacted by HIV, including TGNCNB individuals, reinforcing the commitment to ending the epidemic through inclusive, data-driven strategies.

Community Engagement & Education:

Through community engagement and education, we foster understanding and interconnection between the government and the public, while equipping individuals with the knowledge and resources to build a more supportive society.

The City's **inaugural TGNCNB Health Summit**, held in May 2024 and organized by the Health Department and the Unity Project, represents a groundbreaking initiative designed to foster collaboration, education, and community engagement to promote TGNCNB health. The summit serves as a dynamic forum that brings together TGNCNB individuals, community-based organizations, health care professionals, policymakers, and advocates to engage in meaningful dialogue and collective action. The summit spotlights critical issues in transgender and non-binary health, including barriers to care, culturally competent medical practices, and innovative approaches to improving health outcomes. It provides a platform for sharing best practices, advancing community-driven health care, and addressing systemic challenges. It also serves as a catalyst for change, empowering stakeholders to develop and implement policies and programs that support affirming care. Through expert-led panels, workshops, presentations, and community discussions, the event helps shape a more informed, responsive, and compassionate health care system.

The **Transgender, Gender Nonconforming, and Non-Binary Community Advisory Board (TCAB)**, operated through the Health Department and supported by the Unity Project, serves as a vital bridge between TGNCNB New Yorkers and the Health Department, ensuring that policies, programs, and services are shaped by those most impacted. Created to bridge community with local government and to address the persistent barriers TGNCNB individuals face, TCAB provides critical guidance on programming, educational materials, marketing campaigns, and clinical services. By fostering direct community engagement,

TCAB helps drive meaningful, informed change, making health care more inclusive and accessible.

To further improve health care provision, the Health Department and Unity Project have partnered with Transgender Equity Consulting, Inc. to develop a **LGBTQ+ Cultural Competency Training** for Health Department Sexual Health Clinic staff. The three-hour training covers language, key health considerations, and best practices for providing affirming care.

The **Hidden Voices project**, created by the NYCPS Department of Social Studies & Civics, allows students to find their voice in history, including LGBTQ+ historical figures, as they become analysts of the past while making connections to the present. The Department of Records and Information Services (**DORIS**) operates the **For the Record Blog**, which includes blogposts with primary sources that give an in-depth look at the city's LGBTQ+ history. Additionally, through the **DORIS YouTube Channel**, DORIS documents historic footage in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Annually, ACS conducts its **Youth Experience Survey (YES)** for youth in foster care ages 13 and up. The survey includes questions on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, aiming to improve services for youth. In addition, ACS runs the **Youth Leadership Council** that places a strong emphasis on the voice of LGBTQ+ youth to empower youth in the foster care system and improve existing services. Cultural competency is further supported through the **Family Engagement and Acceptance Training (FEAT)** and **LIFT programs** under ACS and the Unity Project. FEAT provides intensive training for LGBTQ+ mental health clinicians of color to address family rejection of transgender youth. Meanwhile, the LIFT program is a six-month certification designed to equip social workers with the skills needed to support youth and their families.

The **Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) Street Outreach Program** is a vital first point of contact for youth experiencing homelessness, many of them members of the LGBTQ+ community, providing direct education, service navigation, and referrals to essential services. Outreach teams actively distribute information about runaway and homeless youth services; provide food, clothing, and transportation; and connect youth with Drop-In Centers, crisis shelters, and other safe locations. By establishing trust and rapport with youth on the streets, the program ensures that those in need are aware of the resources available to them.

CCHR is deeply committed to **community engagement and education**. CCHR's lead advisors and liaisons play a vital role in educating New Yorkers about their rights and responsibilities. The Commission also provides extensive training, including "Human Rights Law 101" and "Working with Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Communities." The **Commission** also engages in widespread **outreach to raise awareness of these protections**.

Programs:

Delivery of culturally competent services to TGNCNB individuals is at the core of our work in addressing disparities facing the community.

I. Health Care and Wellness

Ensuring access to high-quality, affirming health care is essential to the well-being of the LGBTQ+ community, including TGNCNB people. Through strategic investments, we are expanding inclusive primary care, gender-affirming services, sexual health programs, and HIV prevention efforts. The Health Department launched **PlaySure Network 2.0**, a citywide network of 18 agencies that provide a comprehensive package of HIV and sexual health services in health care and non-health care settings using a one-stop shop model. Through the **Building Equity: Intervening Together for Health (BE InTo Health)** initiative, the Health Department supports nine clinics to implement evidence-based HIV care models that address the needs of communities most impacted by HIV.

The Health Department's **Sexual Health Clinics** provide low-to-no-cost services for STIs, including HIV. The Health Department is unwavering in its commitment to ensuring the Sexual Health Clinics offer safe, affirming spaces. The clinics offer STI testing and treatment, expanded HIV services, counseling, as well as vaccinations, contraception, and more. The Health Department's **Express Clinics** provide a fast, hassle-free option for testing chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV, with results available in just hours.

Beyond medical care, **patient navigators and social workers offer up to 12 no-cost counseling sessions**, connect individuals to essential support services, such as substance use treatment, and continued counseling. In 2022, our clinics led the city's response to the mpox outbreak, providing diagnosis, treatment, and vaccination—services integrated into existing clinic workflows.

As part of HIV prevention efforts, with Unity Project support, **Judson Pride Clinic, H+H's flagship pride health center**, has improved access to **confidential (PrEP) services** for patients with privacy concerns. Judson is able to directly dispense PrEP medication directly to patients as part of a confidential visit for sexual and reproductive health care. Judson has also started offering the injectable form of PrEP, which allows patients to access PrEP medication confidentially and without worrying about adherence to daily medication, a barrier to consistent and effective use. Lastly, to further ensure high-quality, affirming health care, the Health Department partners with **Callen-Lorde Community Health Center** to provide comprehensive services for uninsured LGBTQ+ individuals. These services include primary care to behavioral health care, ensuring that care is accessible, holistic, and affirming.

II. Economic Mobility

Economic empowerment is a critical pillar of equity, ensuring that individuals have access to the resources and opportunities needed to thrive. We are expanding workforce development programs tailored to the LGBTQ+ community, including TGNCNB people.

Investments in career readiness, job placement, and leadership development are breaking cycles of economic hardship and fostering long-term stability. By prioritizing inclusive hiring practices, workplace protections, and pathways to success, we are building a future where every person can achieve financial security and professional fulfillment.

DYCD's SYEP Pride connects young New Yorkers to supportive and welcoming early career opportunities by engaging with employers specifically committed to LGBTQ+ youth through their organizational missions and/or employee resource groups. SYEP Pride Project-based learning for 14–15-year-olds, focuses on developing work readiness skills and exploring career pathways while providing young people with the opportunity to explore LGBTQ+ history, culture, and/or community issues. Short-term jobs and internships for 16–24-year-olds focus on paid work experience and skills building. DYCD works closely with the NYC Unity Project to provide training and programming to providers, worksite supervisors, and participants. SYEP Pride has partnered with a variety of private partners, including Google, Disney Theatrical Group, Louis Vuitton, ABC7, Hermes, Republic Records, Fendi, Playbill, Nordstrom, and others to deliver innovative career exploration, career mentorship, and pride-related events.

III. LGBTQ+ Mental Health, Community Acceptance, Substance Use Prevention, and Harm Reduction

Supporting mental health, promoting family and community acceptance, and expanding access to affirming care are essential to community well-being. With Unity Project support, **Judson Pride Clinic** is building more robust programming and helping a greater number of patients access mental health and community support. The work includes peer support groups, mental health and wellness groups, vocational workshops, and staff training in workshop facilitation. In addition, the Unity Project has supported the renovation of the second floor of the clinic's century-old facilities to create a community space for this programming.

The **Family Acceptance of LGBTQ+ Youth Initiative**, supported by the NYC Unity Project and implemented by the Health Department, is a groundbreaking program dedicated to fostering acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly TGNCNB youth, among parents, caregivers, families, and community. Recognizing that family support plays a crucial role in the mental health and well-being of young people, the initiative provides resources to bridge gaps in understanding and reduce familial conflict. The initiative offers support groups for parents and caregivers; educational workshops for families, community members, educators, and service providers; and one-on-one counseling and conflict mediation to strengthen families. Additionally, it empowers youth through a filmmaking initiative for individuals up to 21 years old, allowing them to share their stories and experiences through creative expression. Social marketing campaigns further amplify messages of acceptance. By emphasizing mental health, education, and cultural competency, the initiative works to create a more supportive environment where young people feel valued, respected, and loved.

The **LGBTQ+ Coalitions** are an initiative, supported by the Unity Project and implemented through the Health Department, dedicated to reducing trauma and addressing substance use within LGBTQ+ communities. Recognizing that traditional drug prevention approaches often fail to consider the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, LGBTQ+ Coalitions takes a community-driven, culturally responsive approach that prioritizes risk reduction and protective factors specific to these communities.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the LGBTQ+ Coalitions have provided critical support to youth, reaching hundreds through innovative programs such as listening sessions, substance-free parties, job and health fairs, social media engagement, art shows, and youth leader award ceremonies. By fostering safe, affirming spaces, the LGBTQ+ Coalitions have helped young people navigate difficult times without turning to alcohol or other substances as coping mechanisms. Beyond prevention, the LGBTQ+ Coalitions actively build resilience through peer-led support groups, leadership training programs, and care coordination services. The program also offers low-threshold counseling.

The Health Department's **crystal methamphetamine harm reduction program** provides vital support for men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender individuals who have sex with men and who use crystal methamphetamine, offering a holistic, affirming, and non-judgmental approach to care, including supportive services. The Health Department's **Psychosocial Support Services for TGNCNB People with HIV** supports partners to provide trauma-informed, culturally affirming care, including individualized counseling, connections to HIV care and treatment, and referrals to essential medical and supportive services.

IV. Social Services, Housing Support, and Food Assistance

Building strong support systems is essential for the well-being of TGNCNB youth, especially those navigating housing instability or food insecurity. Our initiatives focus on creating safe, affirming spaces where young people can access resources, connect with community, and receive support.

LGBTQ+ youth comprise approximately 40% of youth experiencing homelessness. **DYCD's Youth Drop-In Centers**, open to young people aged 14 to 24, serve as safe havens where youth can access food, clothing, showers, laundry facilities, and case management services. These centers also provide referrals to crisis service programs and additional support services, ensuring that youth experiencing homelessness or instability can find the resources they need.

DYCD's Youth Drop-In Centers Expansion, supported by the Unity Project, is a transformative progression aimed at providing around-the-clock support for LGBTQ+ youth in need. With the expansion to five centers with 24/7 service in all boroughs, this initiative ensured that young people have access to safe spaces, essential resources, and supportive community services at any hour.

DYCD's Transitional Independent Living (TIL) Youth Housing Program provides longer-term shelter and essential support for youth experiencing homelessness, aged 16 to 21, with extended services available for young adults aged 21 to 24 at designated Homeless Young Adult (HYA) sites. These facilities are designed to help youth transition to independent living by offering up to 24 months of safe, stable housing while equipping them with the skills needed for self-sufficiency. Youth in the program receive educational support, vocational training, job placement assistance, counseling, life skills training, mental health services, housing referrals, and family reunification assistance when applicable, ensuring a holistic approach to stability and independence. Additionally, **DYCD's Food Assistance Program** ensures that food pantries are available in every borough, providing nutritional support to individuals and families facing food insecurity.

Lastly, **DYCD's Crisis Services Programs**, offer emergency shelter and crisis intervention for youth aged 16 to 20 and 21 to 24 at Homeless Young Adult (HYA) sites. These voluntary, short-term residential programs provide a safe space for young people experiencing homelessness while working toward family reunification when possible. If returning home is not an option, the program helps youth access transitional and long-term placements.

Interagency Coordination:

Underpinning these efforts across City agencies, the NYC Unity Project runs the **LGBTQ+ Work Group – Shaping the Future Together**, a collaborative effort to enhance government operations and ensure that city agencies effectively serve and support LGBTQ+ communities. The work group brings together LGBTQ+ liaisons from key agencies to foster interagency cooperation. Through this coordinated LGBTQ+ Action Group, the city is committed to building a coalition that advances LGBTQ+ representation in government, enhances culturally competent service delivery, and strengthens engagement with LGBTQ+ New Yorkers.

Resource Access:

Our work would not be complete without promoting access to resources.

The **Pride and Care** health resource booklet, funded by the NYC Unity Project and developed by the Health Department, provides information specifically for TGNCNB individuals. This booklet, available in multiple languages, offers critical information on gender-affirming care, primary care, sexual health, safety tips, and community resources.

The Health Department provides essential tools to help LGBTQ+ individuals find knowledgeable, affirming, and LGBTQ+-competent health care providers. The **NYC Health Map's LGBTQ Health Services Directory** serves as a vital resource for those seeking safe, accessible, and high-quality medical care tailored to their needs. The online directory features a diverse network of NYC providers. Beyond simply listing providers, the LGBTQ+ Health Services Directory is designed to help individuals make informed decisions about their health care by highlighting providers with a demonstrated commitment to cultural competency and inclusive practices.

Additionally, the Health Department maintains a suite of LGBTQ+ **webpages that offer health information for men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women (WSW), transgender, TGNCNB individuals, intersex individuals, and suicide prevention.** These webpages provide affirming and compassionate care guidance, outline health care rights, and include resources for individuals and their families to make informed health care decisions.

The **NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) connects LGBTQ+ veterans with services tailored to their needs.** This includes specialized caregiver support, discharge service upgrades, medical care access and navigation, support groups, resource access, and navigation of survivor and dependent compensation (DIC). In addition, veterans who received an other-than-honorable or dishonorable discharge due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression may experience difficulty accessing benefits, including VA home loans, GI Bill educational benefits, and VA health care. DVS helps LGBTQ+ veterans impacted by past discriminatory policies get the benefits they deserve by connecting them to discharge upgrade assistance services.

Lastly, the **NYC Unity Project Website** serves as a digital hub for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers. The newly launched digital platform serves as a comprehensive and user-friendly resource hub, connecting individuals with vital services, programs, and support networks tailored to their unique needs. Whether seeking health and wellness resources, legal assistance, housing support, or community-building opportunities, the NYC Unity Project website offers a centralized destination designed specifically for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers. The platform ensures that individuals can access the information and services they need to thrive. By bringing together citywide initiatives and nonprofit and advocacy organizations under one digital roof, this hub fosters a stronger, more connected community, while considering privacy needs. From mental health resources to legal assistance, the website is more than just an information portal—it is a lifeline, a support system, and a multimedia celebration of the creativity and diversity of LGBTQ+ individuals across New York City.

Position on Proposed Legislation

We are generally in support of the intent behind proposed legislation that offer additional protections to the TGNCNB community. At this time, we, along with our partner agencies, are still reviewing the specifics of the proposed legislation. It will be important to protect the rights of TGNCNB New Yorkers to be free from discrimination and to access care while at the same time protecting privacy during this volatile time. We would like to have further discussions with the Council to discuss the benefits and limitations of each bill and how we can best address the health and safety needs of the TGNCNB community. We want to thank the Council for bringing attention to this important topic and we look forward to working with you.

Conclusion

From the first bricks thrown at Stonewall to the policies and protections we fight for today, our work is part of a long legacy. As we reflect on recent progress made and new and

ongoing challenges, one thing remains clear—our commitment to dignity, compassion, and support for the LGBTQ+ community, particularly TGNCNBI individuals. From the dawn of time, TGNCNBI people have shaped humanity—as healers, spiritual leaders, innovators, and more. In New York City, they have played a critical role in shaping our history and culture. Through collaboration, innovation, and continued investment in culturally responsive services, we continue to build a city where every person is supported and empowered to thrive. By focusing on what truly strengthens our community, we move closer to a future of greater opportunity. Together, we continue our work, uplifting New Yorkers.