

WORKING WITH THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

**A Cultural
Competence Guide
for Emergency
Responders and
Volunteers**



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PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This publication is directed primarily at local, state, federal, and community organizations that provide services in a community impacted by a disaster. It is designed to provide the information necessary to develop culturally sensitive policies and to equip volunteers with the skills necessary to respectfully serve members of the LGBT community in a disaster. This guide will be most useful as emergency response directors create training programs in advance of disasters. A one page cultural competence guide is included as part of this guide for use as Just-in-Time training after a disaster has occurred.

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A DISASTER?

For purposes of this guide, a disaster includes any natural or man-made destructive event that disrupts the normal functioning of a community. These events require preparation, emergency response, and recovery. Cultural competence is effectively providing services to people of all cultures, races, ethnic backgrounds and religions in a manner that respects the worth of the individual and preserves their dignity. The adaptation of preparedness, response, and recovery efforts to fit cultural contexts improves disaster personnel's ability to provide appropriate and effective services in order to best meet a community's needs.

“Developing cultural competence is crucial for providers to fully serve and meet the needs of this community”

WHY IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE NEEDED FOR WORKING WITH LGBT PEOPLE?



Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people make up a diverse community. Members of the LGBT community come from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, religious traditions, and geographic regions. Identification and participation with the LGBT community can also change across the lifespan. Many young people are choosing to come out, or to tell others about their sexuality, earlier than ever. Conversely, many LGBT elders feel pressure to hide their sexuality or revert back to “the closet” when entering assisted living or nursing care.

Although each individual is unique, many who identify as LGBT often share a feeling of being “other” in the broader society. This feeling of being an outsider is a result of the traditional stigma associated with being LGBT. This stigma is further enforced by discriminatory laws and behavior. The perpetuation of LGBT people as “outsiders” through discrimination and violence can result in a shared sense of

minority stress. Underrepresented groups that already experience or report feelings of discrimination in their community are less likely to benefit from disaster relief services both in the short and long term.

Developing cultural competence is crucial for providers to fully serve and meet the needs of this community. This guide provides an introduction to the LGBT community and addresses needs that are potentially unique to LGBT people and families.

WHO IS LGBT?

The term “LGBT” refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

LESBIAN—A woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to other women.

GAY—A term describing a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.

BISEXUAL—A person who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily simultaneously. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary as sexual identity develops over time.

TRANSGENDER—A term describing people who experience and/or express their gender differently from what most people expect. It is an umbrella term describing a range of gender identities and experiences, including those of transsexual people; androgynous people; and others perceived to be gender-atypical.

Some people may not outwardly identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, but may be in a same-sex relationship



“Like all people, LGBT individuals enter into deeply committed relationships and raise children.”

ARE THERE LGBT INDIVIDUALS IN MY COMMUNITY?

LGBT individuals live in your community and will be affected by any disaster that effects the general population. Same-sex couples reside in every county in America and live in both urban and rural communities. According to U.S. Census data, these couples belong to every racial, ethnic, religious, age and socioeconomic group in America. Approximately 8.8 million lesbian, gay and bisexual adults live in America, comprising an estimated 3% of the total population.

WHAT DO LGBT FAMILIES LOOK LIKE?

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Families headed by LGBT individuals or same-sex couples reflect the diversity of families across the country and include blended families as well as families headed by grandparents or extended family. Like all people, LGBT individuals enter into deeply committed relationships and raise children. According to the American Community Survey, there are roughly 777,000 same-sex couples in the United States. Nearly 20% of these same-sex couples are raising children under the age of eighteen, and approximately 270,000 children live within households headed by same-sex individuals.

CHOSEN FAMILIES

Some members of the LGBT community have what are described as “chosen families.” These are usually made up of a group of close friends who fill the traditional role of the nuclear and extended family. These are especially common for older LGBT individuals who came of age at a time when rejection by biological family was common.

SAME-SEX COUPLES

Same-sex couples make the same private decisions that other families make when they choose whether or not to become parents. Many same-sex couples, especially older couples, choose not to become parents. For other couples, the legal and financial barriers to parenthood make adopting or having children out of reach. It is important to recognize a same-sex couple as a family whether or not they have children.

“If a LGBT family comes to you for emergency services you should treat them as a family.”

PROVIDING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBT INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Individuals seeking your help after a disaster have already suffered a trauma. They may be experiencing a loss of possessions or loved ones, and they may have physical injuries demanding immediate attention. This trauma is often compounded for LGBT families and senior citizens who will be entering a service center fearing discrimination or confrontation. You have the ability to alleviate this fear and to communicate to everyone that they are valued, welcome, and safe.

INCLUDE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY IN THE DISASTER RESPONSE PLANNING PROCESS

The best way to ensure that policies are inclusive and welcoming to all LGBT people is to include that community in the process of developing them. Doing so will provide invaluable perspective on ways to best serve LGBT people. You should also recruit LGBT people to become emergency shelter volunteers. Encouraging this engagement will communicate that they are valued members of the community and will increase the likelihood

that they will take full advantage of the services and benefits available to them in the event of a disaster.



RESPECT FAMILY STRUCTURE AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS

If a LGBT family comes to you for emergency services you should treat them as a family. They should be offered the same housing and counseling services that other families receive. It is not appropriate or necessary to ask detailed questions about a family, LGBT or otherwise, in an emergency shelter context. Asking intrusive questions about family structure can further traumatize a family and can deter them from seeking needed medical or mental health treatment after a disaster. If you believe questioning is necessary you should request to speak to a parent out of ear-shot of young children.

A same-sex couple may refer to each other as “partners,” “spouses,” “husbands/wives,” “girlfriends/boyfriends,” or potentially “roommates” or “friends.” If a same-sex couple tells you that they are a family or would like to receive services as a unit, you should provide them with the same services made available to different-sex couples. It is important to remember that these individuals and families have already survived a disaster. Providing a respectful, welcoming environment can allow them to begin the recovery process.



IMPACT OF STATE RELATIONSHIP RECOGNITION RESTRICTIONS

Same-sex marriage is legal in 6 states and the District of Columbia, and 9 states provide an alternate form of comprehensive legal recognition for same-sex couples. Almost 200,000 couples nationwide are legally married or recognized. Same-sex marriage is not currently recognized by the federal government and some states have laws that create definitions of marriage that exclude same-sex couples. However, in the emergency shelter context it is unnecessary to question the legal status of this relationship. Federal and state laws restricting the definition of marriage do not prohibit emergency responders and volunteers from recognizing same-sex couples and LGBT households as families when providing services.

State laws vary as to whether a surviving same-sex partner may make decisions in the event of the death of his or her partner pertaining to property rights, disposition of remains, and notification of family. However, even in states where surviving partners are denied these rights, you should still treat them with respect and compassion. They should be offered the same supportive services and counseling available to other surviving spouses.

“If someone tells you or shows you that they are a woman or a man you should respect this gender identity.”

RESPECT AN INDIVIDUAL'S STATED OR PRESENTED GENDER IDENTITY

Transgender people have a gender identity and express their gender differently than those typically associated with the person's assigned sex at birth. For example, a transgender man is an individual who was born female, but identifies as a man. A transgender woman is an individual who was born male, but identifies as a woman. Volunteers should keep in mind that transgender people may not always “look like” the gender they identify with. In an evacuation situation many transgender individuals may not have updated identification documents available to them. Many individuals also evacuate without personal toiletries, clothing, makeup, shaving supplies and other items used on a daily basis to groom. If someone tells you or shows you that they are a woman or a man you should respect this gender identity. It is unnecessary and harmful to question or express hostility towards an individual because of their stated or presenting identity.

ENSURE SAFETY FOR LGBT INDIVIDUALS

Housing

You should be aware if other occupants of the shelter are threatening or harassing an LGBT family or individual. Harassment, bullying, or unwanted engagement can be very harmful and should not be tolerated. This can include consistent, unwanted proselytizing. These situations can quickly escalate to violence and injury against the LGBT person. If you notice such threats, space should be made for the individual closer to a guard or volunteer. Any incidents of threatened violence should be reported to the head of the shelter and law enforcement should be made aware of any violence taking place in the shelter. Incidents of bullying or unwanted personal conversations should also be acknowledged and shelter volunteers should be directed to intervene when possible.

Medical Care

As part of the intake process volunteers should consult with the individual to ensure that he or she has access to all necessary prescription drugs. Some transgender individuals must have access to prescription hormone therapy. Individuals living with HIV/AIDS also often rely on medication. Volunteers should consult with the individual to ensure that he or she has enough doses of any necessary medication to last throughout the anticipated displacement. If an individual does not have the necessary prescribed medication, he or she should be directed to the medical staff or nursing station that is providing other medically necessary prescription drugs. Failure to provide this treatment can lead to serious health effects. It is unlawful to discriminate against someone

because he or she has HIV or AIDS. Do not disclose an individual's HIV/AIDS status to other evacuees or volunteers. Health providers, public health authorities, or health services leaders in the shelter can provide guidance on ways to ensure the health and safety of all staff and residents without compromising the confidentiality or equal access of HIV-positive shelter residents.

Restroom and Shower Access

You should ensure that all individuals have access to appropriate restroom and shower facilities consistent with their gender identity. Denying individuals access to gender appropriate facilities or failing to provide guidance on shelter policies can lead to violence and further trauma against the individual. Denying this access is also illegal in some states. All shelter volunteers should be made aware of these policies and should be equipped with the process for reporting incidents of violence or discrimination. If possible, gender-neutral restrooms should be made available. The addition of a shower curtain or door may be necessary to ensure privacy and safety for all shelter users.

Confidentiality

Sharing personal information regarding an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity with volunteers or others is unnecessary and can be harmful. Volunteers can greatly reduce the risk of discrimination and violence against an LGBT individual by keeping such status and information confidential and on a "need to know" basis.

“Couples and parents do not need to be married or have documentation of their relationship to be eligible.”

LGBT FAMILIES ARE ELIGIBLE FOR FEMA AND SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION BENEFITS

All families are eligible to receive federal disaster assistance. Couples and parents do not need to be married or have documentation of their relationship to be eligible. Proof of ownership or occupancy should be sufficient for most evacuees seeking assistance as a household. Providing families with false or misleading information can cause long term financial and emotional damage as they begin the recovery process. Volunteers have the ability to ensure that every family is equipped with the knowledge to receive the federal benefits entitled to them under the law.

DEFINITION OF HOUSEHOLD

FEMA Individual Assistance (IA) is provided by "household." This is a broad term and includes everyone living in the residence at the time of the disaster. It does not refer to the nature of the relationship, therefore it is unnecessary to ask a couple if their relationship is legally recognized. Only one person per household will complete the assistance form. The legal owner of the lost property should represent the household. All evacuees should be encouraged to reach out to FEMA for assistance.



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THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN IS THE LARGEST ORGANIZATION IN THE COUNTRY WORKING TO ADVANCE THE RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER AMERICANS.

SERVING LGBT INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES IN A DISASTER

WHAT DOES LGBT MEAN?

The term LGBT refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

- ❑ Lesbian refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to other women.
- ❑ Gay refers to a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.
- ❑ Bisexual refers to an individual who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to both men and women.
- ❑ Transgender can be used to describe an individual whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with the person's assigned sex at birth. A transgender man is an individual who was born female, but identifies and lives as a man. A transgender woman is an individual who was born male, but identifies and lives as a woman.

ARE THERE LGBT INDIVIDUALS OR FAMILIES IN MY COMMUNITY?

Yes. Partnered same-sex couples live in 99.3% of U.S. counties and more than a quarter of a million children are being raised by same-sex couples. Gay couples in southern states like Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas are the most likely to be raising children. Surveys have shown that transgender individuals make up between 1/4% and 1% of the U.S. population. Transgender individuals live in every region of the U.S., including rural areas and small towns.

HOW SHOULD I TREAT LGBT FAMILIES?

After a disaster, LGBT families experience additional stress because of a lack of recognition or fear of discrimination. If a lesbian or gay couple present themselves as a family, you should treat them as you would treat any other family. Refrain from asking questions that you do not ask other families. Only ask questions necessary to provide for the needs of the family.

HOW SHOULD I TREAT TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS?

If someone tells you that he or she is transgender, respect the individual's stated self-identified gender. You may ask which pronouns the individual prefers you to use. Do not ask questions that are not relevant to providing emergency services. Do not share or discuss an individual's transgender status with other evacuees. Only disclose this information to other volunteers or supervisors as necessary to provide services to the individual.

Transgender individuals should have access to housing, restrooms and shower facilities that are consistent with their self-identified gender, or those that feel safest for them. Some transgender individuals may not have matching or updated identification that reflects their gender identity.

ARE THERE LGBT SENIORS IN MY COMMUNITY?

Yes. There are senior same-sex couples living in 97% of counties in the U.S. LGBT seniors may be more afraid of discrimination and less likely to openly identify as LGBT.

HOW SHOULD I TREAT LGBT SENIORS?

If two elderly women or two elderly men tell you they are a couple, treat them as a couple. You can alleviate fears of discrimination by treating LGBT senior citizens with respect and compassion. LGBT senior citizens may have a "chosen family" comprised of close friends who are not necessarily biologically related.

HOW CAN I MAKE SURE THAT LGBT INDIVIDUALS ARE SAFE?

LGBT individuals may be more vulnerable to abuse in an emergency shelter. All reports of harassment should be investigated and reported to the shelter supervisor. If you witness harassment or intimidation intervene if possible.

WHAT ARE SPECIFIC MEDICAL NEEDS OF TRANSGENDER EVACUEES?

Some transgender individuals must have access to prescription medication known as hormone therapy. You should consult with the evacuee to ensure that the individual has enough doses of any necessary medication to last throughout the anticipated displacement. If not, you should direct the evacuee to the medical staff or nursing station that is providing other medically necessary prescription drugs. Failure to provide this treatment can lead to serious health effects.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF SOMEONE TELLS ME THEY HAVE HIV/AIDS?

Treat the individual fairly and with respect; it is unlawful to discriminate against someone because he or she has HIV or AIDS. In addition, you should ensure that the individual has all of his or her prescribed medication. If the individual does not have the necessary prescribed medication, you may direct the individual to the medical staff or nursing center. Do not disclose an individual's HIV/AIDS status to other evacuees or volunteers.