



# Building Trust to Support LGBTQIA+ Youth, Adults, and Families in Shelter and Housing Programs

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## Introduction

This resource highlights how to build trusting relationships between shelter staff, volunteers, and guests that are based on shared accountability, respect, and dignity. Implementing the Equal Access Rule requirements helps create trust by taking steps to ensure LGBTQIA+ guests are provided shelter and services in a welcoming and affirming manner.

## Engage in Respectful and Empathetic Interactions

When staff and guests interact in a mutually respectful manner, they can improve communication and work on establishing and maintaining trusting relationships. Effective approaches for staff to help guests feel a sense of belonging, support, and trust include:

**Engage with guests as individuals.** Ask respectful questions about a guest's experiences and share one's own experiences as relevant and appropriate. Don't make assumptions about guests based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

**Use correct pronouns.** Use the gender pronoun that a guest requests. Adhering to guest's pronouns can help guests feel welcomed, respected, and safe. For a fuller explanation of pronouns, please refer to [Equal Access for Transgender People: Supporting Inclusive Housing](#).

**Recognize that the needs and challenges of guests change.** Be aware of stressors and other factors that may impact an individual's resilience and motivation. Focus on a strengths-based approach by encouraging and celebrating large and small accomplishments.

**Treat the guest's experience as authentic.** Build trust by acknowledging a guest's feelings and helping them think through options that may address their concerns. Hire staff with experience of homelessness who have a commitment to human-centered service provision.

## Prioritize Safety

Creating safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ guests is a critical component to building trust.

**Train staff how to de-escalate inappropriate and unsafe behaviors.** Establish clear and standard procedures for responding to violence, harassment, threats, and intimidation that include conflict mediation and resolution protocols guide staff on effective and consistent ways to intervene.

**Communicate that harassment is not tolerated.** Identify harassment as a range of behaviors that are experienced as offensive, aggressive, or intimidating regardless of physical location or proximity to the project. For LGBTQIA+ guests, this can include consistently or maliciously not using the guest's chosen name or affirmed gender pronoun, asking any questions about a guest's body or appearance, disclosing that a guest is transgender or gender non-conforming, or physical intimidation.

**Physical Spaces.** Ensure that guests have a right to request a room or bed based on their personal safety and privacy concerns. For shower use, consider implementing a schedule for all clients if communal showers are the only available type of shower.

**Remain non-judgmental and respectful.** Do not threaten, insult, or judge guests. Use empathy and recognize that due to trauma, guests may be hypervigilant and respond to perceived threats in an aggressive manner.

## Respond Promptly and Consistently

Addressing issues that arise promptly is crucial for building trust for several reasons. When staff addresses harassment, discrimination, inappropriate behavior, etc. directed towards LGBTQIA+ guests, it can indicate guests' wellbeing and safety are prioritized and it may prevent escalation. When responses are consistent, they become predictable. This predictability may help guests feel secure because they know what to expect.

**Managing and Resolving Violations.** Ensure that all guests know how to file grievances and address grievances with standard protocols that support quick and transparent resolution. Take immediate action to resolve inappropriate behavior, harassment, or Equal Access issues by any person (guests, staff, volunteers, or contractors). Mediate and resolve conflicts between guests in a respectful, fair, and equitable way. Focus consequences on the individual who is performing harassing behaviors. Ensure safety for all parties during the resolution process. Return to participant agreements to remind individuals about behavioral expectations.

**Ask staff or guests for input about what they need to feel safe when they are the victim of an incident.** Making time for the victim, the person who has caused harm, and others to discuss the impact of the harm and agree on actions to take to best repair the harm can help shelters model their commitment to physical and emotional safety.

**Create an environment that allows for mistakes and growth.** Listening to a guest's perception of an incident can help the guest and staff determine the most effective way to prevent it from recurring. If staff misapply a policy or respond inappropriately, taking responsibility for their actions and repairing their relationship with the guest is critical to maintaining trust. When guests make a mistake, have established escalating levels of intervention to resolve conflict and communicate clear rules and transparent, and publicly

## Address Self-Harm and Suicidality

Studies show there's greater suicide risk among LGBTQIA+ youth.

It's important to train staff to:

- ✓ Recognize common [self-harm behavior](#) and [warning signs of suicide](#),
- ✓ Be familiar with the [5 Action Steps to Help Someone Having Thoughts of Suicide](#), and
- ✓ Quickly connect guests to the appropriate level of help and resources.

### Resources

SAMHSA's [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) (call or text 988) is a free, confidential 24/7 phone line that connects individuals in crisis with trained counselors.

[The Trevor Project](#) provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQIA+ youth ages 13-24 and educates young people and adults on detecting and responding to suicide risk among LGBTQIA+ youth.

posted guidelines and policies about suspensions (e.g., verbal warning, written warning, suspension, and appeal process) that include steps a guest is expected to take to address concerns and regain shelter entry. Reserve suspensions for serious infractions.

## Support Individual Choice and Maintain Confidentiality

Guests are often asked to share very personal and private information when they are accessing services. Being clear as to why they are being asked personal questions and who can access this information is pivotal to building trust. Also, letting guests know they may choose not to disclose information that they are not comfortable with is paramount to building trust between staff and the guest. For a guest to feel comfortable sharing information, they should know where and when that information might be shared. Permit guests to request private space to complete intake and data collection.

**Chosen name.** Use intake materials that allow guests to give the name they identify with. If a legal name is required by the funder, then both the chosen and legal names should be collected.

**Gender identity.** When asking for gender identity, allow individual to self-identify. It is important that staff, volunteers, and contractors understand that a guest may not present the same way that they identify and that they will respect the guest's identity. It is also important to understand that many guests may have a fluid identity (gender fluid) and may offer up over time or at different times identities that may not be aligned with an identity provided previously. This is a part of someone's ongoing journey to be and feel affirmed, and providers should work to understand the uniqueness of gender identity.

Educate staff, volunteers and contractors that, unless a guest gives permission to share this information, a guest's gender identity is confidential information and the potential impact that disclosure can have on a guest's safety.

When entering data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the guest's self-reported gender must be recorded. When enrolling a guest who already has a record in the HMIS, verify that gender information is complete and accurately reflects how the guest identifies, and correct if it does not. HMIS users and data entry staff should apply a [Client-Centered Approach to Recognizing Gender Identities in Data Collection](#). Staff observations should never be used to collect information on gender.

## References

The Trevor Project. (2024). [Mental Health Care Access and Use among LGBTQ+ Young People](#).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2024.

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