

2012

“NOT UNDER MY ROOF”



Homeless LGBTQ Youth in Toronto: A Needs
and Supportive Housing Demand Analysis

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Executive Summary

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to measure the demand for a supportive housing unit dedicated to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth homeless population in the City of Toronto, and to determine the unique needs of this target group with respect to housing and skills development.

Demand

Research indicates that 23% of all homeless and street involved youth identify as LGBT. The most recent homeless count completed by the City of Toronto in 2009 found that 489 youth were homeless. This means that at any one time there are roughly 112 homeless youth who identify as LGBT. However, the homeless count only assessed those people who were obviously homeless or were using shelter services. It would be reasonable to conclude that the estimate of 112 LGBT identified youth who are homeless is a lower bound which can aid us in “right-sizing” a proposed facility.

The 2009 homeless count indicated that 9 out of 10 people who are homeless would strongly prefer to live in permanent housing. This is in line with the interviews conducted for this analysis in which 8 out of the 10 youth surveyed strongly indicated that they would like to live in an LGBTQ specific living facility. Issues such as the desire for permanent housing, a commitment to life-improving activities and a willingness to adhere to principles of healthy living all suggest that an LGBTQ transitional living facility could best serve anywhere between 25-35 people.

Finally, it is important to note the realities of the rental market in Toronto and young people’s struggles with substance abuse, sex work, mental health issues, etc., are such that independent transition is rarely possible. As a result, we conclude that a supportive transitional housing model will best serve this community.

Qualitative Observations

LGBT youth are overrepresented in the homeless population (23%), relative to their representation in the overall population (2-4%). They generally have strong feelings of distrust and unease in engaging with the existing shelter system, often hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity when they do access these services. The challenges faced by this demographic are further compounded by the lack of appropriate homeless services taking into account LGBTQ specific needs (e.g. suicidality, drug use, sex work, gender transition). Throughout the interview process, LGBTQ youth identified key issues that must be addressed in any supportive housing facility which seeks to effectively meet their needs.

Recommendations

1. There is strong demand and a clear need in the City of Toronto for an LGBTQ assisted living facility that serves between 25-35 youth and that such a facility should be built.
2. This facility must take a harm-reductive, intersectional, and skills-development approach to best address the unique challenges facing Toronto’s LGBTQ youth and to facilitate their transition to stable long-term housing.

Introduction

For the purposes of this needs assessment we borrow our definition of homeless youth from the “Homeless Hub” website, which is a collection of Canadian and international homelessness research curated by Stephen Gaetz, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University and Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network:

“Our definition of homeless youth, in the Canadian context, includes young people up to the age of 24 who are no longer living with parents or guardians, and who lack stable housing, employment and educational opportunities. When we speak of homeless youth, we are really talking about young people who are living in extreme poverty, and whose lives are characterized by the inadequacy of income, health care supports and importantly, the kinds of social supports that we typically deem necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood – parental and family support, teachers, etc.”¹

Regardless of a person’s status as homeless or adequately housed, the period between 12 – 24 years of age can be a turbulent time of self-discovery filled with uncertainty and trepidation. This is doubly so for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. They often experience profoundly negative emotions upon realizing that their sexual orientation or gender identity does not match that which has always been expected of them. These emotions are further compounded by efforts to hide or keep this information from family and friends. Feelings of fear, anxiety and secrecy can mark this stage of LGBTQ people’s lives and is popularly known as being “in the closet”. However common this experience is, being “in the closet” can leave many with deep psychological scars where mistrust and suspicion often cloud experiences and relationships with family and friends. Even when LGBTQ youth do work up the courage to “come out”, they often face social ostracism, public shaming and familial rejection.

This report assesses the housing needs of LGBTQ homeless or “street involved” youth in the city of Toronto. Such an assessment is motivated by a number of factors:

1. School and home life are the primary source of support and socialization in the lives of youth. Rejection in one or both of these areas, which LGBTQ youth disproportionately experience, constitutes a serious risk factor for youth homelessness;
2. Research indicates that 23% of street involved youth in Toronto identify as LGBT²;
3. There are currently no shelter/housing services dedicated to the specific needs of LGBTQ youth in the city of Toronto or anywhere else in Canada; and
4. There are successful shelters/assisted living facilities dedicated to LGBTQ youth in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Paris and London.

Goals

1. Determine if there is sufficient demand in Toronto for a shelter/assisted living facility for homeless and street involved LGBTQ youth;

2. Identify the reasons why LGBTQ youth represent such a large portion of the homeless youth population in Toronto and how the current shelter system is not meeting their needs; and
3. Provide recommendations which will guide any future LGBTQ-specific shelter/assisted living facility in addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ youth.

Demand

From the Interviews

For the purposes of this needs assessment ECHRT conducted ten face-to-face interviews with homeless youth who identified as LGBTQ. Interview questions and associated methodology were approved by York University's Research Ethics Board. Among other things, these youth were asked if they would use an LGBTQ-specific assisted living facility. Of the ten youth interviewed, eight indicated very strongly that they would use such a facility, while two youth indicated partial interest in doing so, but required further information to make a decision. This indicates that there would be a high level of initial demand for such a facility among Toronto's LGBTQ street-involved youth.

Toronto's Homeless Population

On April 15, 2009 the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration of Toronto City Council conducted a city wide homeless count. According to the report, 3990 people were accessing city shelter services and 400 people were sleeping on the street³. Of the 4390 homeless people counted, 489 were youth⁴. However, the count did not take into account people who "couch surf" or were otherwise unstably housed. This report indicates at least a base number from which to work.

A survey conducted by Stephen Gaetz et. al indicates that 23% of homeless youth in Toronto identified as LGBT⁵. We can therefore conclude that on any given night at least 112 LGBT youth are homeless in the city of Toronto. Moreover, because the city survey did not take into account all of the ways that people are unstably housed, it is more than likely that the number is higher.

The City of Toronto's homeless count also indicated that 9 out of 10 youth desired permanent stable housing. However, according to CMHC's "Rental Market Report: Ontario Highlights" the availability of rental units in Toronto rests between 1.1-1.4%⁶. The national average is 2.5%. This rate pushes the average rent for a bachelor apartment to \$819⁷. It is unlikely that a homeless youth can afford roughly \$1638 for first and last month's rent, in addition to the \$819 for each subsequent month. The way to give these youth the best chance of transitioning from street life to independent living is to invest in transitional housing.

Other LGBTQ specific Facilities

The demand for LGBTQ specific transitional housing units can be exemplified by looking at examples of similar types of facilities around the world. Below are listed a number of such facilities with corresponding capacity and waitlist numbers.

Table 1: LGBTQ Youth Facility Demand¹

Name of the Facility	Location	Number of Beds	Waitlist
Ruth Ellis Center	Detroit	10	30-40
Isis House	Seattle	10	2-7
Larkin Street Youth Services	San Francisco	Varies	6 months
Ali Fournery Centre	New York City	77	100
L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center	Los Angeles		Emergency Housing 3-4 weeks, Transitional Housing 4-5 months
Le Refuge	Paris	25	261

Each of the facilities that were contacted had a waitlist. Seattle’s LGBTQ shelter has a waitlist despite having a population that is little more than a quarter of Toronto’s².

Demand Conclusion

An LGBTQ transitional living facility in Toronto could support between 25-35 residents. This number was arrived at by starting with the base number of LGBT homeless youth in Toronto (112), and reducing it as follows. The interviews conducted for this report indicate that 80% of youth were interested in living in an LGBTQ specific transitional living facility, thereby reducing the number of potential enthusiastic residents to 90. We then consider the fact that 20% of youth interviewed only experienced a short stint of homelessness. This implies that they were able to tap into existing resources (e.g. grandparents) to aid in their transition back to stable housing. Since a transitional housing facility best serves youth with experiences of longer term homelessness, our number of potential residents drops to 72. Finally, since any facility is likely to have a strict code of conduct and serious expectations around education, work life, and job training, we estimate only 50% of potential residents will be able to comply. We therefore conclude that an LGBTQ transitional living facility in Toronto could support from 25-35 residents.

Context: LGBTQ Youth Overrepresentation

Family and school life represent two major areas of socialization for all children. According to Sharon Nichols, “In addition to families’ and parents’ influence on social and emotional functioning, school connectedness (as measured by students’ attitudes of school fairness, sense of community, attendance rates, and levels of prejudice) was an important antidote to at-risk behaviour.”⁸ Further research indicates that LGBTQ youth are having a much more difficult time in feeling connected to their schools than their heterosexual counterparts. This, in turn, makes them more susceptible to at-risk behaviour and correspondingly increases their likelihood of living on the streets.

According to *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, authored by Professor Catherine Taylor

¹ The facilities listed in this table and the associated numbers were attained by contacting the relevant employees of the organizations. These numbers were given by the employees with access to this information.

² The City of Toronto lists the population at 2.48 million people. The City of Seattle Washington lists their population as 608,660 people.

from the University of Winnipeg and Professor Tracey Peter from the University of Manitoba, LGBTQ youth face greater prejudice and victimization in their schools and a correspondingly lower level of school connectedness than their heterosexual peers. The report indicates that:

- 61% of gay male students and 66% of lesbian students reported having been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (compared with 29% and 37% of non-LGB males and females respectively);⁹ (See page 58 and correct)
- 20.8% of LGBT students reported being physically assaulted compared with 7.9% of their heterosexual peers;¹⁰ (Verbiage to be confirmed)
- 35.7% of lesbian or female bisexual youth, 41.4% of gay or male bisexual youth and 49.4% of trans youth reported sexual harassment at school (compared with 16.6% of heterosexual females and 23% of heterosexual males);¹¹
- 64.2% of LGBT students felt unsafe in their schools (compared with 15.2% of their heterosexual peers).¹²

Another study, by the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, showed that victimization by their peers is “one of the strongest predictors for school disengagement for sexual minority and questioning youth.”¹³ Further studies of Canadian youth indicate that upwards of 28% of LGBTQ youth drop out of high school at some point compared to the national average of 9%.¹⁴ (Little 2001, p. 105, change reference) LGBT youth are overrepresented within the homeless population in part because of a lack of school connectedness and the social support it provides.

The second major area of socialization for youth is family life, and disengagement from this environment can have disastrous consequences for a young person’s development and transition into adulthood. According to an article by Caitlin Ryan in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, “Studies show that LGB adolescents’ relationships with their parents are often challenged, particularly around the time of disclosure of sexual identity or coming out.”¹⁵ LGBT youth who face rejection from their families are:

- 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide;¹⁶
- 5.9 times more likely to report having higher rates of depression;¹⁷
- 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs;¹⁸ and
- 3.4 times more likely to report engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse.¹⁹

Further, 18.5-42% of LGBT youth have attempted suicide, with 75% of these youth citing their sexual orientation as the biggest factor in their decision to end their life.²⁰ Nearly half of sexual minority youth who have committed suicide experienced “chronic dysfunction, including neglect and abuse, in their relationships with family members or romantic partners.”²¹ Moreover, “Excessive amounts of openly expressed anger, aggression, and conflict among family members have been found to be associated with...greater levels of school maladjustment regarding peer relations and rule compliance”²². Clearly, strained familial relationships which LGBTQ youth experience give rise to risk factors associated with homelessness, e.g. depression, substance abuse, lack of kin support, etc.

LGBTQ youth disproportionately face conflict and rejection in their family and school lives due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This makes them more susceptible to at-risk behaviour and consequently, they are vastly overrepresented in the overall homeless youth population. Individual interviews conducted for this needs assessment confirm this conclusion; challenges at home and at school (related to the young person’s sexual orientation) were the most commonly cited explanation for homelessness.

Homeless LGBTQ Youth

Study after study confirms that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population. Below are the results of five North American studies of homeless youth in several regions. These results vary widely due to different definitions and categorizations, as explained by Ann P. Haas, Ph.D. Director of Prevention Projects, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:

“Sexual minorities are defined with reference to two distinct and complex characteristics: sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual orientation is generally defined as having at least three dimensions: sexual self-identification, sexual behaviour, and sexual attraction or fantasy (Saewyc et al., 2004; Sell, 1997). Researchers have tended to define sexual orientation by one or another of these dimensions, most often using as the defining criterion either self-identification as gay/lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual, or the gender of one’s sexual partners (same sex, both same and opposite sex, or opposite sex)”²³

Table 2: Percentage of Homeless Youth Identifying as LGBT

Region	LGBT	LGB	Trans	Size of Sample
Calgary ²⁴		20%		340
Toronto ²⁵	23%			244
British Columbia ²⁶		26%	1%	762
New York City ²⁷		28%	5%	945
Massachusetts ²⁸		33%		6653

In a study of homeless youth in the City of Toronto conducted by Stephen Gaetz, homeless LGBT youth who were interviewed faced a greater degree of victimization when compared to their straight peers.

- People who were younger when they first became homeless were twice as likely to identify as “non-heterosexual.”²⁹
- 60% of queer female youth reported being victims of sexual assault at sometime in the past year.³⁰

Other studies on homeless youth have indicated that:

- 40% of homeless gay youth were kicked out as a result of conflict regarding their sexual orientation;³¹

- 41.3% of homeless LGB (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual) youth reported having a major depressive episode (compared to 28.5% of heterosexual youth);³²
- 47.6% of homeless LGB youth meet the criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (compared to 33.4% of homeless heterosexual youth);³³
- LGBT youth are 7.4 times more likely to report instances of sexual victimization;³⁴
- 52.4% of homeless lesbian and gay youth have alcohol abuse issues (compared to 42.2% of their heterosexual peers); and³⁵
- 47.6% of homeless lesbian and gay youth have abused illegal drugs (compared to 39.2% of their heterosexual peers)³⁶

LGBTQ homeless or street-involved youth face a greater degree of emotional and physical abuse when compared with their heterosexual counterparts. These overlapping and intersecting challenges unique to the LGBTQ youth homeless population make it much more difficult to transition to stable long term housing. Currently there are no programs that holistically address all of these issues for LGBTQ homeless youth in the City of Toronto. As such, the best solution to this problem is the creation of a transitional living facility dedicated to addressing the unique challenges facing the LGBTQ youth homeless population.

The Need: Failures of the Current Shelter System

The majority of individuals interviewed were recruited through a partnership with Supporting Our Youth³. Others approached us through word of mouth. Each young person was paid an honorarium of \$50 for their time. In total, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust interviewed ten individuals who had experience with homelessness. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded, though anonymity was preserved. This study was approved by York University’s Research Ethics Board. Interviewees signed a consent form and were informed of their rights throughout the interview process (e.g. the ability to not answer a question, answer it at a later time or stop the interview entirely without affecting their relationship with Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, York University or Supporting Our Youth). Demographic data is presented in the table below.

Table 3: Interview Subject Profiles

Youth	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Age When First homeless	Length of Homelessness
#1	17	Gay	Male	15	1 year+
#2	27	Gay	FtM, Trans	18	9 years
#3	27	Gay	Male	15	10 years
#4	28	Gay	MtF, Trans	15	10 years
#5	29	Queer	Male	20	6 years
#6	18	Gay	Male	16	2 years+

³ Supporting Our Youth (SOY) is an exciting, dynamic community development program designed to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered youth in Toronto through the active involvement of youth and adult communities.

#7	16	Gay	Male	14	3 weeks
#8	20	Bisexual	Female	15	2 years
#9	17	Lesbian	Female	13	2 years
#10	18	Gay	Male	16	1 week

*Some individuals interviewed no longer qualified as “youth”. However, they were interviewed because they had extensive experience as homeless youth in Toronto and confined their responses to that period in their lives.

Youth Experiences

What led to your being in a shelter, living on the streets or not living in stable housing?

“At first it was my parents being homophobic. My mom especially couldn’t take it because she was homophobic. I know she is transphobic, but I am not out to her as trans yet... when I told her I was gay and I liked girls she was like if I knew you would have turned out this way I would have aborted you.” – Youth #2

“An abusive relationship at home... It was a combination of many small things from the age of 12 onward... from the age of 12 she thought I was going to kill her... mix that in with depression and other things after a final argument it was the last straw. So I found a way out by running away.” – Youth #5

While, LGBTQ youth homelessness has similar precipitating factors as heterosexual youth homelessness, youth who identify as LGBTQ face the added factor of familial rejection based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This causes an overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth living on the street, living in shelters or not living in permanent stable housing. It is also useful to note that among youth interviewed, sexual orientation was the reason most often given for leaving home.

Where did you sleep at night while you were homeless, street involved or not living in permanent stable housing?

“I would sleep pretty much wherever I could find some warmth like edges of parking lots or on vents. At one point I had a tent under a bridge.” – Youth #7

“There was a period of four months where I was completely homeless. I slept under Bathurst Bridge. I avoided the shelters because I was afraid of being bashed. I tried to go to Covenant House but I left because of homophobic experiences. I just turned around and left.” – Youth #6

The youth usually listed a variety of places they slept at night while they were homeless, street involved or not living in permanent stable housing. Many of the youth who stayed in shelters indicated that it was only for a portion of their time spent on the streets. This could indicate that statistics gathered from shelters only cover a portion of a youth's experiences with homelessness.

What are your experiences with shelters? Alternatively, why did you stay away?

"I have been to every youth shelter except for one, every youth shelter in Toronto. TP (Turning Point) is close to the village and it is ok to a certain extent but it had a violent sort of atmosphere because they have in all of these thugs and hardened criminals in there with all the gay kids. It can be a little bit dangerous and then there are people who are on drugs and shit and it can be a little dangerous. My friend who is a Trans Female to Male he went there and he almost got raped cause some guy came on to him and then realized that he has 'incorrect' genitalia." – Youth #3

"Some of the experiences were limiting, especially when you are 20 and you have a curfew of 11pm. It feels like you are in prison. A lot of shelter staff have a background in corrections, so it often shows when they are dealing with certain crises." – Youth #5

Shelters elicited almost universally negative reactions in the youth who participated in the interviews. The primary reason most often given for the negative responses was because shelters were seen as places that were unsafe for, or inattentive to, people who identify as LGBTQ. Several of the youth cited their sexual orientation as the reason for being attacked within the shelter system. Alternatively, the violent reputation of shelters in general made some youth unwilling to even approach the shelter, preferring to sleep under bridges or in public parks.

Have you ever been violently attacked while you were homeless, street involved or not living in stable housing?

"I was raped by four guys. They ended up taking me across the street to where there was this thing where there is a lot of trees and stuff and that is where it all happened... there was this other guy who took me to the alley way and ended up doing that in the alley way." – Youth #2

"Not too many people can kick my ass. Some people have tried to jump me but I have kicked their ass. One guy came after me with a knife at the shelter. The problem is that people in the shelter system, when they get violent they get violent very quickly. So you have to watch what is going on with them and keep them in a place away from you so that you are not in harm's way." – Youth #3

Some interviewees had violent experiences both within the shelter system and living on the streets. In general, interviewees had feelings of anxiety in relation to the danger that they felt. They would often change their daily routine in order to avoid potentially troubling situations. Those who lived on the street instead of shelters identified street gangs as a major source of fear for them. Apparently, the public parks that are commonly used by homeless youth to sleep in are also inhabited by “homeless gangs”. Conflict with gangs was cited as a reason why interviewees were constantly on the move.

Issues/Recommendations

Interviewees identified several issues that they dealt with while homeless, street involved or not living in permanent stable housing. In this section, some key issues are identified and discussed, followed by recommendations derived from youth interviews and generally accepted best practices.

Shelters

Some interviewees indicated that it was the problems with shelters that made them choose instead to live on the street. This significantly increased their risk for substance abuse, sex-work and violence from other street-involved individuals as well as members of the general public.

1. **Shelters are unsafe for LGBTQ people:** While no interviewee indicated that any shelter was open and accepting of their sexual orientation or gender identity, many indicated that a number of them were outright unsafe for LGBTQ people. In the more hostile shelters, interviewees suggested that what made the shelter so bad for LGBTQ youth was both the residents and either indifferent or negative staff. This situation persists despite training from the City of Toronto that should equip shelter staff to better serve LGBTQ residents and enable them to operationalize equity policies. Rather than seeking services from shelters, interviewees almost unanimously chose to access services provided by external LGBTQ-positive organizations like Supporting Our Youth, the 519 Church Street Community Centre and Central Toronto Youth Services, none of which offer a housing component. Among those interviewed who did choose to live in shelters, a number chose not to eat at the shelter, preferring only to be there to sleep. Another shared fear associated with shelter life was having personal property stolen or destroyed as part of a homophobic or transphobic incident.
2. **Cycle of homelessness:** Interviewees also felt that the shelter system contributed to a lengthening of their period of homelessness. First, they felt that some of the shelter staff were not well enough informed of grants and programs that facilitated the transition to stable housing. Moreover, it was also suggested that, given that the city funds shelters on a per diem basis, shelters constantly have to maintain a certain capacity in order to stay open. This misalignment of interests results in a disincentive to shelters to transition youth to more stable housing.
3. **Shelters are too restrictive:** More specifically, interviewees pointed to policies such as the 11 pm curfew of shelters and suggested that this presented challenges with respect to seeking employment and in having a social life. This is extremely problematic as stable employment and strong peer-support networks are often key to breaking the cycle of homelessness. One youth specifically indicated that he could not accept a job offer in North York because, even if he took

the quickest route home, he still would not have made curfew. The path to independent living is currently fraught with trip-wires that have a negative effect on a young person's potential.

Recommendations:

1. LGBTQ youth should have the option of a separate LGBTQ-specific shelter/supportive housing unit to cut down on the trauma of homophobic and transphobic discrimination, bullying and violence which they experience in the general shelter system.
2. The primary focus of any LGBTQ-specific facility should be on working with residents to understand their specific needs and to aid in their transition to independent living as quickly and as safely as possible. It should be understood that some are capable of transitioning faster than others. Stable funding should be found so that the proposed shelter/housing can concentrate fully on helping to resolve residents' homelessness.
3. Facility rules should be flexible enough to operate in the best interests of residents. For example, residents should be able to make arrangements ahead of time if they are going to need to break curfew. As well, if a youth has access to employment, all necessary steps should be taken to accommodate that youth until they are stable enough to achieve independent living.
4. An agreement between the facility and new residents should be signed once they are granted a spot in the facility. This will ensure that residents know exactly the rules by which they are expected to live.
5. If a resident loses their spot in the facility they should have a time period of one to two months in which they can make alternative housing arrangements.

Sex Work

Studies indicate that between 25% and 40% of street involved and homeless youth are engaged in the sex trade. Within this statistic, gay male youth are particularly overrepresented.³⁷ This is an issue that any LGBTQ-specific facility will need to confront.

Recommendation: Provide residents with the strategies, skills, and confidence they need to exit the sex trade. If a resident does not wish to do so, the facility must provide training and services that ensure that they are as safe as possible.

HIV and AIDS

Homeless youth in general are at a greater risk of HIV infection than the general population.³⁸

Recommendation: At a minimum, the facility should provide condoms, dental dams, lube and sexual health workshops to all residents. While it should not be mandatory, residents should be strongly encouraged to get a family doctor and to know their HIV status.

Personal Space

Interviewees who had experience with shelters identified the lack of personal space as a major problem for them.

Recommendation: An LGBTQ-specific facility should have apartments for residents which provide them with ample personal space.

Family Reconnection

All interviewees identified problems with family as the reason that they became homeless or lacked permanent stable housing. According to Daphne Winland et al. Canada's response "to youth homelessness largely ignores the potential role of family members in helping people move forward with their lives."³⁹ Family reconnection would be the most ideal solution to homelessness for LGBTQ youth.

Recommendation: Any LGBTQ-specific facility should have a program that works to reconnect residents with their families. However, given safety and mental health issues, participation in this program should be voluntary.

Community Kitchen

A recurring theme in the interviews done for this study found that a majority of interviewees rejected the idea of a community kitchen. In their view, it would be seldom used and had the potential for creating community conflict.

Recommendation: An LGBTQ-specific facility should aim for kitchen facilities that are shared between two residents only, to create a system of mutual accountability. As part of the intake process, every new resident should undergo basic life skills training, including: budgeting, shopping for food, and cooking. A large community kitchen could be best used for ongoing education and training activities in a group setting.

Alcohol

This is an issue that split interviewees pretty evenly. Half of them indicated that they would not like to have alcohol anywhere on the premises. Many have had previous substance abuse problems and being around alcohol would increase their likelihood of relapsing. However, others indicated that if alcohol was strictly prohibited they would just go elsewhere (e.g. parks, open areas) to drink. Finally, by permitting alcohol in a controlled environment there is an opportunity to promote responsible drinking and harm reduction strategies.

Recommendation: There should be alcohol free rooms, areas and floors to be negotiated by the residents. This model is used on several university campuses that deal with underage youth and of age youth cohabitating in close quarters. Preventative measures should be put in place to ensure that otherwise restricted activities are monitored and made as safe as possible.

Location

All interviewees indicated that they would like to see the facility somewhere in the downtown core. Two reasons were cited: 1. the surrounding community needed to be supportive of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; and 2. external services that they need to survive are mostly located in the downtown core (e.g. youth group dinners, legal advice). Most recommended that the facility be in the Church and Wellesley Village area.

Recommendation: Investigate building options in downtown Toronto. The Church and Wellesley Village may be the most desirable option for residents, however, other areas such as Cabbagetown/Regent Park, Queen West and St. James Town may provide unique value and must be assessed as well.

Education

Only one interviewee indicated that they were attending post-secondary education. However, every other youth interviewed spoke about their need for employment and indicated that a lack of employment contributed to the length of their homelessness.

Recommendations: According to the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada, those that have some form of post-secondary education are more likely to be in the workforce.⁴⁰ Not only are they more likely to be in the workforce, they are also more likely to maintain employment during periods of difficult economic times.⁴¹

1. The facility should explore partnerships with local universities, colleges, trade schools and school boards to provide residents with the opportunity for further education and job skills development. This will make it less likely that residents will have a repeat experience of homelessness as it will increase their employability and recession resilience.
2. Explore community-based educational partnerships such as sourcing life-skills workshop presenters from among students in the chef school at George Brown College to help residents learn to cook.

Work/Employments

All interviewees were either on Ontario Works, looking for employment or currently employed. One of the major recommendations from the interviews was that there should be some form of employment assistance/training within the facility. The focus of the facility should be on teaching residents jobs skills while also being supportive of their identities.

Recommendations:

The focus of the facility should be on getting residents into paid employment (or alternatively, educational programs) as soon as possible. Two approaches that could be pursued:

1. Partnerships: the facility can partner with local businesses to provide residents with employment opportunities. Partnering will be beneficial for the youth as it will give them the opportunity to interact with the wider community, gain valuable employment skills and allow them to transition into independent living much faster.
2. Social Enterprise: the facility should investigate the feasibility of creating a social purpose enterprise (such as a coffee shop) that residents can learn and work at. This is useful for two reasons: the shelter/housing would have a revenue stream to offset operating costs and the youth would have access to valuable work experience.

Conclusion

This needs assessment has laid out why LGBTQ youth are vastly overrepresented in the homeless population in the city of Toronto. It is also obvious that the specific needs of LGBTQ homeless youth are not being met by the current shelter system. By ignoring sexual orientation and gender identity, the shelter system further harms the psychological, emotional and physical development of LGBTQ youth. Those who have had traumatic experiences coming out to their family are often forced back into the closet when they access shelter services either by homophobic/transphobic staff or residents. Many of the youth interviewed for this needs assessment preferred to sleep on the street rather than have to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in a shelter. Efforts to make the current shelter system safe for LGBT youth should continue. However, this approach has not worked and is why LGBT youth need a separate facility in which to feel safe while they transition to independent living.

Building an LGBTQ-specific housing unit would instil a sense of belonging and community that homeless LGBTQ youth are currently lacking. By providing a separate facility where residents feel safe to be who they are, we will allow them to concentrate on developing the skills necessary to transition to independent living. Residents should be provided with the opportunity to complete high school, attend college, university or other forms of post-secondary education. An integrated/holistic approach to skills development will give LGBTQ youth the best chance to successfully transition to independent living.

Next steps

1. Create a business plan to fully understand the scope of the project that is proposed.
2. Produce a financial feasibility analysis to ensure that such a project is fiscally possible.
3. Create preliminary architectural specifications for the housing unit to give all potential partners a clear understanding of the proposed facility.
4. Strike a working group of interested community partners, corporations, individual donors, and subject matter experts who would be interested in contributing to this project.
5. Establish links with relevant municipal, provincial and federal governments.
6. Create a fundraising campaign to raise capital funds.

Any LGBTQ-specific housing facility must be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances as well as stable enough to provide consistent care to the youth who are living there. The focus of the facility should be the creation of long-term viable solutions to residents' homelessness. Most critically, LGBTQ youth need to feel that their lives have meaning and that their futures are full of potential.

"It is really hard living on the streets. To have people portray you as different and dangerous affects how you perceive yourself, that you have no purpose at all." (youth #2)

¹ Gaetz, "Who are street youth?".

² Gaetz, O'Grady, and Buccieri, *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*, 30.

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- ³ *Street Needs Assessment Results*, 14.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁵ Gaetz, O’Grady, and Buccieri, *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*, 30.
- ⁶ *Housing Market Information: Rental Market Report, Ontario Highlights*, 57.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁸ Nichols, “Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth: Understanding Diversity and Promoting Tolerance in Schools,” 507.
- ⁹ Taylor et al., *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, 57.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 85.
- ¹³ Wells, “Research Exploring the Health, Wellness, and Safety Concerns of Sexual Minority Youth,” 224.
- ¹⁴ Alderson, Orzeck, and McEwen, “Alberta High School Counsellors’ Knowledge of Homosexuality and Their Attitudes Toward Gay Males,” 93–94.
- ¹⁵ Ryan et al., “Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBTQ Young Adults,” 206.
- ¹⁶ Ryan et al., “Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young Adults,” 346.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Rajabali et al., *Suicide and Abuse Prevention Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender & Two-Spirited (GLBT) Youth: Proposed Framework for GLBT Youth Suicide and Abuse Prevention*, 5.
- ²¹ Wells, “Research Exploring the Health, Wellness, and Safety Concerns of Sexual Minority Youth,” 5.
- ²² Ketsetzis, Ryan, and Adams, “Family Processes, Parent Child Interactions, and Child Characteristics Influencing School-Based Social Adjustment,” 375.
- ²³ Haas et al., “Suicide and Suicide Risk in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Populations: Review and Recommendations,” 13.
- ²⁴ Worthington et al., *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street*, 21.
- ²⁵ Gaetz, O’Grady, and Buccieri, *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*, 30.
- ²⁶ Smith et al., *Against the Odds: A Profile of Marginalized and Street-involved Youth in BC*, 17.
- ²⁷ Freeman and Hamilton, *A Count of Homeless Youth in New York City*, 13.
- ²⁸ Corliss et al., ‘High Burden of Homelessness Among Sexual-Minority Adolescents: Findings From a Representative Massachusetts High School Sample’, 1685.
- ²⁹ Gaetz, O’Grady, and Buccieri, *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto*, 35.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ³¹ Whitbeck et al., “Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies and Victimization among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents,” 334.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Cochran et al., “Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities - Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Homeless Adolescents With Their Heterosexual Counterparts,” 774.
- ³⁵ Whitbeck et al., ‘Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies and Victimization Among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents’, 335.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 330.
- ³⁸ Dematteo et al., “Toronto Street Youth and HIV/AIDS - Prevalence, Demographics, and Risks,” 366.
- ³⁹ Winland, Gaetz, and Patton, *Family Matters: Homeless Youth and Eva’s Initiative’s Family Reconnect Program*, 17.
- ⁴⁰ *Education At A Glance: 2011 OECD Indicators*, 117.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 118.