

REPORT ON THE STATUS OF

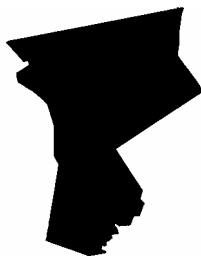
LGBT People

IN WESTCHESTER COUNTY

PREPARED BY

LGBT Advisory Board

SEPTEMBER 2003



introduction

THE WESTCHESTER COUNTY LGBT ADVISORY BOARD

was formed in March 2002 to advise the County Executive on issues important to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. In order to fulfill its responsibilities, the Advisory Board gathered information from people throughout the County regarding their most important problems, concerns and needs. After reviewing and analyzing the responses, the Advisory Board produced this report on the status of LGBT people in Westchester County.

The information gathering process involved convening small focus groups of people who answered a series of questions in a discussion format. Paper surveys were also distributed for individuals to answer open-ended questions. Local LGBT community groups and leaders were identified and asked to participate and a concentrated effort was made to reach a wide variety of people. All of this work took place between January and June 2003 with over 100 people participating in the survey.

LGBT Advisory Board

Carly Borenkind
Patrick Cacciola
Janis Castaldi
Andres Espinosa
Norman Friedman

Mary T. Keane
Wilfredo Morel
Roxane Offner
Joann Prinzivalli
Steven Warren

LGBT Community Liaison

Laura Newman

summary of findings

AFTER TALKING WITH LGBT PEOPLE ALL OVER WESTCHESTER County, the Advisory Board was not surprised to find that this community has specific challenges and needs. Many of the issues that face the LGBT Community stem from a general lack of societal acceptance and legal rights. In addition, the personal problems of individuals have an adverse, cumulative impact on the community at large. The nature of living in a suburban location seems to have a negative influence because the LGBT community in Westchester County is not highly visible and does not have identifiable public gathering places.

From the information gathered, the Advisory Board found the following points to be significant and worth special mention:

- ▼ LGBT people who are also young, old, transgendered or in racial or ethnic minority groups experience increased oppression and/or isolation.
- ▼ LGBT people who cannot, or choose not to, "pass" as straight experience more discrimination and harassment. This is also true for people who live outside gender norms. Staying "in the closet" makes life easier for some LGBT people.
- ▼ Many respondents in the survey have children and ex-spouses.
- ▼ Most of the respondents include friends, neighbors, and other people who are not blood relatives as part of their families. This is particularly true for seniors and young people.



common themes

THE INFORMATION GATHERED IN THE FOCUS GROUPS AND PAPER SURVEYS

highlighted several issues that were important to LGBT Community members. The most frequently discussed concerns were:

- ▼ **Visibility/Isolation** - The LGBT community in Westchester County is less visible than in some areas. Members of the community feel strongly that more visibility is important.
- ▼ **Health Care** - Many participants in the survey feel that health care providers need information about how to provide appropriate care for LGBT people. Due to fear of negative responses, many LGBT people do not reveal their sexual orientation or true gender identity to their doctors.
- ▼ **Health Care Benefits for Partners** - LGBT community members are frustrated that many employers still do not offer health care benefits for domestic partners.
- ▼ **Lack of Partner Recognition and Marriage Rights** - It is highly important to many LGBT people in Westchester County to have their relationships legally recognized. Many survey respondents feel that equal marriage rights are a high priority.
- ▼ **LGBT Student Harassment** - People of all ages are concerned about the hostile environment in schools and safety issues for LGBT students.
- ▼ **Training for Educators** - There is general agreement that providing training for educators is a critical part of the solution for ending school violence against LGBT students.
- ▼ **Police Hostility** - LGBT people, especially in communities of color, report dissatisfaction with police responses to their complaints. In some places, there is repeated police hostility toward LGBT people.
- ▼ **Discrimination** - Survey respondents report experiencing discrimination in employment, health care, insurance, and public accommodations due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- ▼ **Support Systems** - Many LGBT people feel the need for support systems within the community. They are looking for health and human service programs as well as social opportunities.
- ▼ **Resources** - Access to resources is a priority for many people. LGBT Community members want to easily find resources for sensitive professionals and health care providers as well as LGBT-identified clubs, restaurants and shopping.

people with specific issues

Transgendered Individuals expressed unhappiness with the lack of general acceptance and understanding of their concerns. Employment discrimination and lack of legal protections are issues that are amplified for transgendered people.

Lesbian and Gay Senior Citizens unanimously complained of feelings of isolation due to their sexual orientation. Participants in this group were much more likely to be hiding their sexual orientation from family, neighbors and friends. They also cited lack of affordable housing and transportation problems as high concerns.

LGBT Youth expressed serious concerns about harassment at their high schools. Some college students also mentioned being harassed in their school's neighborhood. Many out LGBT youth said they have problems with their families or they have not revealed their sexual orientation to their families due to fear of reprisal.

People of Color/Hispanic LGBT Adults reported mistreatment by police and harassment in their communities. Many of the people in this group feel that their physical safety is often in jeopardy. They also cited unaccepting families and immigration issues as additional problems they face.



recommendations

LGBT Advisory Board Recommendations to Improve the Status of LGBT People in Westchester County

AFTER THOROUGH ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY, the Advisory Board believes there are a number of actions the County can take to improve the lives of LGBT people living in Westchester County. The following recommendations are made with consideration of current budget constraints and realistic expectations.

ACTIONS TO BEGIN WITHIN ONE YEAR:

1. Add resources on the County's LGBT Community website to address the needs of the young, old, transgendered and people of color.
2. Publish a series of informational pamphlets to educate service providers about the needs of the LGBT Community and empower LGBT people to help themselves.
3. Fill vacancies on various County Advisory Boards with openly LGBT people.
4. Submit a formal proposal to modify the County's Human Rights Law to specifically include transgendered individuals.
5. Mandate sensitivity training on LGBT issues for all internal County Departments that provide services to the public.
6. Institute sensitivity training on LGBT issues for the Westchester County Police Academy.



recommendations

ACTIONS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION:

1. Provide additional funding for service providers to offer expanded health and human service programs for the LGBT community.
2. Create a grant initiative for community-based organizations to reduce LGBT-based harassment in Westchester County public schools.
3. Require all County funded programs to implement sensitivity training on LGBT issues.
4. Require all County funded programs to have anti-discrimination policies that include protections for transgendered people in service delivery and employment.
5. Appoint a Police Department liaison to the LGBT community.

IN ADDITION, the Advisory Board has identified the following initiatives that its members can work on to supplement the County's efforts:

1. Schedule meetings with LGBT community groups to share the results of the status report project.
2. Identify openly LGBT people to consider for appointment to various County Advisory Boards.
3. Collaborate with community groups to meet with school officials to discuss the problem of LGBT student harassment.
4. Create a Speakers Bureau for presentations on LGBT issues.



conclusions

While all of the concerns brought out during this project are important and valid, not all can be addressed on a County level. For those issues that are within the County's domain, the Advisory Board feels that implementation of the above recommendations will improve the lives of LGBT people living in Westchester County.

It is the Advisory Board's intention to monitor progress on these recommendations and conduct an evaluation at the end of one year's time. At that time, additional recommendations and/or modifications will be considered.



addendum i

PAPER SURVEY QUESTIONS

I live in (town): _____ I live with: _____

Gender: _____ Race: _____ Age: _____

What are the biggest problems you or your friends have faced personally as an LGBT person living in Westchester County?

What do you think are top priority issues for LGBT people in general?

What services do you think the County should provide for LGBT people?

What community groups for LGBT people are you aware of or connected to?

Who are the people you consider your "family" and why?

If you would like to receive email notices about issues and events important to the LGBT Community, please supply your email address.

OPTIONAL INFORMATION:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____



addendum ii

COUNTY SUPPORT FOR THE LGBT COMMUNITY

Financial Support:

- ▼ Funding for The Loft's Help Line through Department of Social Services (since 1995)
- ▼ Funding for WJCS/Center Lane program through the Youth Bureau (since 1999)
- ▼ Seed money for The Loft's program for LGBT Senior Citizens (2003)
- ▼ Sponsorship of Healing The Hurt Conference (since 2002)

Legislative Initiatives:

- ▼ Human Rights Law (1999)
- ▼ Domestic Partner Registry (2002)
- ▼ Transgender inclusion in Human Rights Law (in progress)

Programs/Resources:

- ▼ LGBT Community Website (2001)
- ▼ LGBT Community Resources Booklet (since 1998)
- ▼ Established LGBT Advisory Board (2002)
- ▼ Public service video on LGBT teens (2003)

