

# EMPIRE STATE PRIDE AGENDA

## Testimony for Joint Legislative Hearing of the 2013-14 Human Services Budget

### From the Empire State Pride Agenda

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As New York's statewide LGBT civil rights and advocacy organization, the Empire State Pride Agenda is deeply committed to achieving equality and justice for all New Yorkers. Our mission is to win equality and justice for LGBT New Yorkers and our families. We recognize that while significant cultural, legal and governmental advances have led to greater equality for LGBT New Yorkers, we and our families remain highly vulnerable without the vast majority of rights and protections that most New Yorkers take for granted.

New York State must live up to its constitutional promise of providing a health and social service safety net that works for the common good of all New Yorkers. That includes ensuring that there are enough shelter beds available for the growing runaway and homeless youth population, and that young people within OCFS juvenile justice facilities continue to be treated in a respectful and humane manner that recognizes their sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

Even though it is difficult to determine just how many runaway and homeless youth are present in New York State or New York City, most folks have accepted the findings from the 2008 report from the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services that states there are approximately 3,800 young people on the streets on any given night. Determining how many of these young people identify as LGBT is even more difficult even though we know that homelessness disproportionately impacts LGBT youth. Most estimates range from an alarming 15% to an eye-popping 40%.

LGBT youth are also becoming homeless at younger ages than heterosexual youth. The Empire State Coalition report noted that LGB youth became homeless at an average age of 14 and four months, and that transgender youth becomes homeless at an average of 13 and five months. As LGBT youth people come out at younger ages, they are also experiencing family rejection and social discrimination at younger ages.

LGBT people of color continue to be the most affected by homelessness. An astounding 44% of the LGB youth identified as black and 26% identified as Hispanic. Of the transgender youth, 62% identified as black and 20% as Hispanic.

Being homeless on the streets of New York City is already a terrifying experience, and LGBT runaway and homeless youth face additional challenges just for being who they are. Family conflict continues to be the primary reason for why many LGBT young people become homeless, but we must realize that traditional approaches to reuniting the young person to their family simply do not work. In fact, reuniting the young person with his or her family may actually be the worst way to stabilize their living condition because many LGBT runaway and homeless youth have suffered from physical or emotional abuse by their families, including sexual assault and attempted murder. We must recognize that family rejection is a key factor to having young people report higher rates of attempted suicide, depression, use of illegal drugs and unprotected sex, but also recognize that alternate methods and alternate family structures must be deployed and explored.

Schools are another traditional support system that has historically failed LGBT young people. Schools continue to be hotbeds for bias-based harassment and discrimination. Even though the passage of laws like the Dignity for All Students Act have helped provide school districts with the tools necessary to create safe and inclusive environments, LGBT students still face incredibly high rates of physical and verbal abuse, which can be directly linked to high rates of depressive disorders and truancy.

In many cases, the shelter system has offered no reprieve either. There are already too few shelter beds in New York City. For a population of almost 4,000 to have access to only 250 beds is unacceptable for a city as robust and resourceful as New York City. But increasing the number of shelter beds is not enough. We must work to create more safe spaces within the shelter bed system for LGBT runaway and homeless youth. Even though there have been great strides made to increase awareness and cultural competency of LGBT issues, many LGBT young people still face significant levels of stigma and discrimination. Organizations like the Ali Forney Center and others continue to struggle with wait lists that go into the hundreds because LGBT young people would rather sleep on the streets than access some of the mainstream providers.

All of these factors contribute to LGBT runaway and homeless youth facing disproportionately high levels of attempted suicide, serious depression, use of illegal drugs, and unprotected sex. In order to have a meaningful impact on the health and wellbeing of LGBT runaway and homeless youth, we must

take a comprehensive approach to their needs, which must include an action plan that incorporates their LGBT identity.

**First and foremost, New York State must restore funding for homeless beds for runaway and homeless youth to the \$4 million level.** New York State slashed funding for shelter beds by almost 50% two years ago and the already-strained system never recovered. We must do more to create safe and inclusive spaces for these young people, and ensuring that they do not need to resort to methods that place their lives in jeopardy is only the beginning to help them achieve their full potential.

As part of addressing the root issues that cause homelessness, New York State must develop a stronger, more holistic plan of action that incorporates mental health, substance abuse, and trauma services as part of primary health care services using strong client-centered case management services, with strict adherence to confidentiality rules. Runaway and homeless youth providers must also be trained to identify symptoms of mental health, substance abuse, and trauma and address these issues directly or by way of referrals to appropriate specialists.

Furthermore, the Empire State Pride Agenda has worked closely with the Office of Children and Family Services to create one of the most LGBT-inclusive juvenile detention systems in the country. Under the direction of Commissioner Carrion and Governor Paterson, the Office of Children and Family Services implemented a series of policies that ensured LGBT young people would be treated fairly while under the care of the state. In response to a 2001 report by the Peter Cicchino Youth Project for the Urban Justice Center that found that LGBT youth were regularly discriminated against within juvenile detention facilities, the Office of Children and Families Services worked valiantly to remove barriers for medical care for transgender youth, trained staff on the unique needs of LGBT youth, and made sure LGBT youth had access to the gender-specific facilities of their choice. Leading this progressive movement was the widely hailed Red Hook facility in Dutchess County. Many LGBT youth commented on the inclusive space that Red Hook provided and requested to be transferred there. Slated to close in the 2013-2014 Executive Budget, we hope that the lessons learned at Red Hook will be spread as broadly as possible in order to create true systemic change within the juvenile detention system.