Strengthening services for LGBTQ clients: Best practice recommendations for rural low-income service providers

Elizabeth G. Holman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Ramona F. Oswald, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Dina Izenstark, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Shawn N. Mendez, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Kimberly A. Greder, Iowa State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dina-izenstark/11/
**Sexual orientation:** Also known as sexual identity, a person's sexual orientation describes their romantic or sexual interest or attractions, which may be to someone of the same sex or of a different sex. A person's sexual orientation does not necessarily dictate sexual behavior and vice versa.

**Minority:** A term to describe people who identify as something other than heterosexual, i.e., LGBTQ individuals.

**LGBTQ:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) refers to a person’s gender identity rather than their sex assigned at birth. Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct identifiers. In the United States, the commonly used and recognized acronym is LGBTQ; we are really only speaking to the experiences of LGBTQ individuals as well.

**References**


5. The purpose of this brief is to describe the experiences of LGBTQ people with financial difficulties living in rural America and to provide recommendations for best practices. Our goal is to provide resources to help you strengthen your current efforts to welcome and serve sexual minority clients.

6. The terms queer and gay are often used interchangeably. However, the term queer has also been reclaimed by some sexual minorities, particularly younger generations, as a broader term to refer to a non-heterosexual orientation.


8. This refers to a person’s gender identity rather than sexual orientation, specifically a person whose gender identity is different than the sex assigned at birth.


10. Sexuality and family. The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

**Myths & Facts**

- **Fact:** Individuals in your town may identify as LGBTQ even if there is not a visible gay community. Current information from the US Census and other large population surveys shows that same-sex couples live in all types of communities across the United States. Sexual minorities can be found in large cities as well as small, rural, close-knit towns. In fact, LGBTQ parents are more likely to live in family-friendly neighborhoods in suburban and rural communities. LGBTQ people, like many others, choose to live outside of cities because they prefer a less densely populated neighborhood, believe there is less stress living in a rural area, and enjoy the country and natural amenities available.

- **Fact:** Despite the images shown in the media, LGBTQ people do experience poverty, and actually face more financial barriers than heterosexual people. LGBTQ people have a more difficult time getting hired, often receive less compensation and benefits compared to heterosexual people in the same position, and may experience a more hostile work environment because of harassment from colleagues. As of Sept. 2014, it is still legal to fire someone based on their sexual orientation alone in 29 states. Also, not all same-sex couples have two incomes, and no children. One or both individuals may be unemployed/underemployed and/or have children. Same-sex couples may choose to have a child together through adoption or artificial insemination/surrogacy—but they may also bring children into their family from a previous relationship.

- **Fact:** Sexual minorities are a threat to some because they are in a relationship with someone of the same sex. If you aren’t in a same-sex relationship, you aren’t really LGBTQ.
19 women who participated in this project identified as lesbian or bisexual. All of these sexual minority mothers interacted with social service providers in some way:

- 84.2% received SNAP benefits
- 73.7% received WIC services
- 52.6% received food at a food bank in the past year
- 47.4% received TANF
- 47.4% received WIC services
- 31.6% resided in subsidized housing units
- 26.3% received LIHEAP
- 15.8% received unemployment benefits
- 11.1% received General Assistance benefits

Approximately 1/3 of these 19 families experienced food insecurity.

Lucy’s Story

Lucy is a 21-year-old, single mother living in the rural Midwest. She identifies as a lesbian, and has a 2-year-old daughter. Ashlynn. Lucy lives with her grandmother who helps care for Ashlynn and provides financial support. This situation can be difficult though, since the support Lucy’s family provides is conditional. They have accepted her being a young, single mother, and have helped to provide financial support, but they do not accept her lesbian identity.

With nearly all of her immediate family living in the same rural community, Lucy finds it difficult to be her authentic self with anyone. Her father, whom she describes as a big influence in her life, threatened to disown Lucy if she ever disclosed her sexual orientation to anyone outside the family. She also thinks that many people in small town are “judgmental” and “close-minded” to anyone who is different. These attitudes make Lucy fear for her safety and the well-being of her daughter. She feels forced to hide who she is so that her family will continue to support her and so others do not ostracize or belittle Ashlynn.

Rural communities like Lucy’s are often tightly organized entities upholding certain values and family structures. This can be difficult to navigate for anyone who feels like an outsider, even if they have belonged to that community for generations, like Lucy’s family. Accessing services or asking for financial help could be easier for Lucy if she felt that her local agencies were a safe space for her to be herself—even if that means just talking to her caseworker without feeling judged or having to constantly minimize or hide a part of herself. It can be difficult for Lucy to open up and share her life experiences with her WIC coordinator when she is afraid to reveal her lesbian identity or previous relationships with women.

Lucy is a motivated, and hard-working mom, trying to support herself and her daughter. When she is blocked by messages that she is not accepted or supported, it becomes difficult for her to access services in her rural community.

“I wish I could get food stamps...that’s the biggest thing, food. Everything else we can manage, but we live on $50 every two weeks for food. It’s not the easiest thing in the universe, and this, the worst part is, to be completely honest, is the fact that the cheapest food to buy is the stuff that you don’t want to eat. Cause like, I like vegetables...”

>> Dana, a 36 year old, bisexual, mom of an 8 year old child, living in rural Washington state

The fact that rural LGBTQ mothers are already using support services for low-income families necessitates that culturally competent services are provided, agency policies are supportive of sexual minorities, and steps are taken to ensure that LGBTQ people have safe and judgment-free access to care. Your organization may already be implementing some of the recommendations below.

Implementing these recommendations would make your willingness to serve this population even more visible.

- Maintain confidentiality is crucial. An individual may not be ‘out’ to everyone as a sexual minority even if he or she has chosen to disclose this identity to you.
- Consider the beliefs and attitudes reflected in your agency’s mission statement. Ensure that all policies and personnel in your organization are appropriate for LGBTQ people.
- Provide ongoing training opportunities for all staff members that include comprehensive education about LGBTQ issues.
- Employment non-discrimination laws (e.g. ENDA) at the local, state, and federal levels will help alleviate workplace discrimination and may prevent some of the risks of poverty for LGBTQ people by removing the disproportionate barriers to employment and compensation.
- Relationship recognition laws (i.e., marriage rights for same-sex couples) will also improve the financial situation for many sexual minorities, providing access to employee-sponsored health care and other benefits. They also normalize same-sex couples as just another type of family unit in America

Law Makers

- Employment non-discrimination laws (e.g., ENDA) at the local, state, and federal levels will help alleviate workplace discrimination and may prevent some of the risks of poverty for LGBTQ people by removing the disproportionate barriers to employment and compensation.
- Relationship recognition laws (i.e., marriage rights for same-sex couples) will also improve the financial situation for many sexual minorities, providing access to employee-sponsored health care and other benefits. They also normalize same-sex couples as just another type of family unit in America

LGBTQ People

- Know your rights. Seek legal advice if you feel you are being discriminated against. Call Lambda Legal’s Help Desk toll-free at 1-866-542-8336 for information or assistance.
- Disclose your sexual minority status, if you feel safe to do so. Disclosure shows others that LGBTQ people do exist in your community. You may be serving as a role model for other sexual minorities and can bring awareness of LGBTQ issues to your neighbors.

Example training materials for LGBTQ cultural competence can be found here: http://www.diversity.va.gov/training/

Ensure that policy language and assessment protocol does not unfairly disadvantage LGBTQ people or same-sex couples (for example, do not use legal marriage as criteria if same-sex marriage is banned in your state).

Example available here: http://www.diversity.va.gov/training/

This may mean implementing a new written nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity. Example available here: http://glifoundation.org/grants/within-colorado/gender-expression-toolkit/sample-nondiscrimination-policy/

Maintaining confidentiality is crucial. An individual may not be ‘out’ to everyone as a sexual minority even if he or she has chosen to disclose this identity to you.

Call Lambda Legal’s Help Desk toll-free at 1-866-542-8336 for information or assistance.

Disclose your sexual minority status, if you feel safe to do so. Disclosure shows others that LGBTQ people do exist in your community. You may be serving as a role model for other sexual minorities and can bring awareness of LGBTQ issues to your neighbors.

Example training materials for LGBTQ cultural competence can be found here: http://www.diversity.va.gov/training/

Example available here: http://www.diversity.va.gov/training/

Ensure that policy language and assessment protocol does not unfairly disadvantage LGBTQ people or same-sex couples (for example, do not use legal marriage as criteria if same-sex marriage is banned in your state).