

Uncounted on the streets

Homeless LGBT youth face uncertainly, lack of resources in Carolinas

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Q Notes

A person's life can change in seconds. Sometimes it can be the death of a loved one, or it could happen by just a few words. "Mom, Dad, I love you and I hope you will understand what I'm about to tell you. I'm gay." The ideal scenario is that the parents will remember this is their child and, no matter what, they will provide unconditional love. All too often this isn't the case. Many young adults have found themselves on the streets. Alone. Hungry. Scared. Homeless.

This social disease cares not whom it infects. It does not identify its victims by gender, socioeconomic status, geographical area, but it is more noticeable in the LGBT population.

Rev. Nancy McLean and her staff lead Joseph's House in Greensboro, which provides housing to young men between the ages of 18-24 years old from all over the state.

Joseph's House received a \$4,000 grant from the Guilford Green Foundation (GGF) to provide housing to LGBT youth. There are only nine beds to serve this widespread social ill. Currently there are four LGBT youth at Joseph's House. All four are African-American — two are brothers.

The grant from GGF allowed Joseph's House to subsidize rent for two LGBT youth. Although they are accepting more LGBT youth to their program, the need continues to rise. In February, McLean said, there were 12 applications and only two beds available at the center. Four applicants were gay. McLean estimates she has to turn away close to a dozen young men every month.

"We believe it is an overlooked population," McLean said of the homeless LGBT community. She estimates that over 40 percent of the applicants of Joseph's House self-identify as gay.

She has her own personal convictions, but sets them aside in order to serve youth in need.

"How would Jesus interact with homeless youth?" she asked. "I cannot be a Christian and not reach out to a homeless young person."

McLean's center is the only direct provider of housing to young men in her area. In the next five years, she hopes to increase capacity.

The GGF grant also allowed McLean to attend Wildacres Leadership Initiative. She is using the tools she gained there to train the staff. Challenging their personal assumptions and beliefs will help foster a more equitable atmosphere in the center. Staff is able to teach youth that while they might have differences, their circumstances should unite them.

Steve Bentley, executive director of Charlotte's Time Out Youth (TOY), said he's noticed the youth he works with have become homeless because they have lost their jobs. TOY does not have a shelter, but operates an emergency housing program in which volunteers temporarily take in youth between the ages of 18-23. Their focus is to get youth to become, and remain, self-sufficient, providing resume preparation, bus passes and teaching interview skills.

LGBT youth find it difficult to get housing in shelters because they feel unsafe. During Bentley's two years at TOY he knows at least three young people who have spent at least one night in a shelter. Two of those three reported sexual abuse during their stay there.

Homelessness is communal in nature and is subject to the rules homeless society has constructed for itself, according to Liz Clasen-Kelly of Charlotte's Urban Ministry. Those rules don't include much tolerance for LGBT people.

Urban Ministry conducted a vulnerability study that has been done in 12 major cities in the nation. Clasen-Kelly and a team of over 100 volunteers scouted out homeless people in community shelters, abandoned buildings and worked with police to locate tent camps in the city. The survey will help identify “chronically homeless” people — single adults who are homeless for a year or more, or those experiencing four episodes of homelessness in the last three years

Data from the Urban Ministry survey showed 807 chronically homeless people in Charlotte, and projected 388 were likely to die on the street.

The vulnerability study did not identify the presence of the LGBT homeless community, but national statistics show that 20-40 percent of homeless people self-identify as LGBT.

“Our heart has always been with those hardest to serve,” said Clasen-Kelley, who says her organization has been pro-active and taken steps to become a safe place for all. Staff have received tolerance training. According to policy, abusive language is not allowed, although staff are left to implement and enforce the policy — “abusive” is not defined and left open to interpretation.

Urban Ministry partners with local colleges and churches to provide the area’s homeless with a safe place to stay during the winter months. Women, and those who identify as female, are the first people accepted.

All organizations agree that funding is paramount to their ability for providing services. Funding not only provides beds for at-risk youth, but also provides job training, apartment subsidies, education for staff and, most importantly, safety.

Bentley says the LGBT youth he works with are less likely to have family to fall back on and most are not from here. Often, organizations like Joseph’s House, TOY and general homeless shelters are the only support mechanisms left for at-risk youth.

Without family support, and being so far away from home, youth are left without guidance in a turbulent world of uncertainties. “The younger we are the less we can anticipate what’s next,” Bentley said. : :

Filling the need...

Several organizations across the Carolinas work with or serve LGBT youth. Some offer limited services to those facing homelessness.

Joseph’s House

Housing, support

709 E. Market St. Suite 106, Greensboro, NC 27401

336-389-9880

nancy@josephshouse.net

Time Out Youth

Emergency housing, support

1900 The Plaza, Charlotte, NC 28205

704-344-8335

sbentley@timeoutyouth.org

General youth services

A Safer Place for Youth Network (ASPYN)

Support, advocacy

316 W. Cabarrus St., Raleigh, NC 27601

919-832-4484

tcw@tcworks.org

YouthSAFE

Support, social

A project of Gay-Straight Advocates for Education (GSAFE) and PFLAG Greensboro, YouthSAFE meets at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month for support, fun and informal discussion at the Green Bean, 341 S. Elm St., Greensboro, NC 27401.

youthsafe@gmail.com

gsafe.org

Y-FLAG

Support, social

A project of PFLAG Winston-Salem, Y-FLAG is a social and support group for teens 15-19 years old and meets at 7 p.m. on the first and third Wednesdays of each month at Trinity Presbyterian Church, 1416 Bolton St., Winston-Salem, NC 27103

336-922-3549

pflagwinstonsalem.org

For more LGBT community resources, visit goqnotes.com/qguide.