

**MAKING  
SPACE**

*An Introduction to*

# **Rainbow Homelessness**

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A knowledge brief for Making Space

## About

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Making Space is a collaborative effort between RainbowYOUTH and Te Ngākau Kahukura to address rainbow homelessness in Auckland.

Our aim is to build capacity within the housing and homelessness sector to provide safe and effective housing support services that are responsive to the specific needs of takatāpui and rainbow people experiencing homelessness. Our goal is to reduce the frequency, duration and likelihood of recurring homelessness in our communities.

This knowledge brief offers a simplified snapshot into what we know about rainbow homelessness and, in particular, the role of housing and homelessness service organisations.

In this text we use the term rainbow to cover a range of identities that fall widely under the umbrella of diverse sexualities, genders, and sex characteristics. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the term rainbow is sometimes preferred as it is not bound to Western conceptualisations of sexuality and gender. Further, the term has gained favour with community groups and service providers, as it is widely inclusive (including, for example, people who are in the process of understanding their identity and those who have yet to 'come out').

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*By the end of 2022, we aim to have developed tools for homelessness service providers to help them make their services safe, affirming, and responsive for takatāpui and rainbow people.*

# The nature of the challenge



## Understanding ‘homelessness’

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Making Space has adopted the Statistics New Zealand definition of homelessness:

***“Living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing: are without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with a household or living in uninhabitable housing.”***

There are various forms of homelessness, including (but not limited to) people sleeping on the street, living in a car, couch-surfing with friends or strangers, and staying in a shed.

Some forms of homelessness are less ‘visible’ than others—a young person couch-surfing is less noticeable than someone sleeping outside a storefront, for example, and less likely to be captured in homeless counts or service provision statistics.

We understand homelessness as a complex phenomenon shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and historical factors. In Aotearoa New Zealand, homelessness cannot be detached from settler colonialism and the resulting displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Māori people (Groot et al., 2017).

## Rainbow homelessness

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At present, there are no national statistics concerning rainbow homelessness in Aotearoa New Zealand. Still, there is some indicative local data that rainbow people are over-represented among those with current or recent experiences of housing precarity and homelessness (e.g., Clark et al., 2021; Housing First Auckland, 2019; Pihama et al., 2020; Veale et al., 2019).

- Rainbow-identified participants in the YOUTH19 survey were significantly more likely to report housing deprivation (38%) than their non-rainbow peers (28%; Clark et al., 2021).
- Counting Ourselves revealed that nearly one in five (19%) trans and non-binary people have experienced homelessness (Veale et al., 2019).
- Emerging evidence points to takatāpui (Māori) people being overrepresented in homeless populations (Pihama et al., 2020; Vandenburg, 2022; Veale et al., 2019).
- The Household Economic Survey found rainbow people were more likely to rent than the non-rainbow population, and more likely to live in dwellings that had problems with damp, mould, or warmth (Statistics New Zealand, 2020).

These figures align with anecdotal accounts from local communities and service organisations, including RainbowYOUTH, that suggest rainbow homelessness is a growing issue in our own backyard (see Murphy, 2020; Saxton, 2020).



## International evidence

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Most of what we know about rainbow homelessness comes from international contexts, in particular Canada, United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

- Reports from the United States and Canada suggest that rainbow people account for an estimated 20–40% of homeless populations, despite comprising only 7–10% of the wider population (Abramovich, 2012; Choi et al., 2015; Ecker, 2016).
- Rainbow youth and young adults are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than their straight and cisgender peers (Morton et al., 2018).
- Relative to the wider rainbow population, trans and gender diverse people face an increased likelihood for experiences of homelessness, with nearly one in three having experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (James et al., 2016).
- In a recent Australian survey, which focused on people with an intersex variation, 6% of respondents reported being homeless or living precariously (Jones et al. 2016).
- Trans women (McNair et al., 2017; Shelton et al., 2018) and rainbow youth of colour (i.e., racial minorities and Indigenous people; Choi et al., 2015; Shelton et al., 2018) face the greatest risk of experiencing homelessness in their lifetimes.

Researchers contend these figures are likely to be conservative estimates and do not capture the full extent of rainbow homelessness (Cray et al., 2013).

Notably, the majority of current research is centred around the experiences of rainbow young people, thus knowledge about the experiences of rainbow adults and elders remains sparse (Ecker et al., 2019). This limitation is reflected in the findings presented in this brief.



*“Before our eyes, a tragedy is growing that must not be ignored.”*

Masters, 2017

***“No single narrative can capture all the factors that drive so many LGBTQ young people to experience homelessness or housing instability.”***

Price et al. 2019

## Pathways into homelessness

Pathways into homelessness for rainbow people are the result of complex interactions between structural inequalities (e.g., homophobia, cissexism, racism), institutional inequalities (e.g., punitive welfare), interpersonal challenges (e.g., familial breakdown), and intrapersonal challenges (e.g., addiction; Abramovich, 2016; Choi et al., 2015; Ecker, 2016, Shelton et al., 2018). Some of the factors that lead to homelessness include:

- Poverty is the primary driver of homelessness. Rainbow people experience poverty at higher rates compared to cisgender heterosexual people (Choi et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). Economic instability is often related to discrimination in employment, healthcare, and educational contexts.
- Familial rejection and conflict within the home are amongst the most commonly noted causes of homelessness for rainbow young people (e.g., Choi et al., 2015; Ecker, 2016; Shelton, 2016). Some young people are kicked out of their home after coming out, while others leave to evade a toxic environment or out of fear of possible mistreatment.
- Substance use and mental health difficulties are also frequently cited as contributing factors to homelessness among rainbow people (Abramovich, 2012; Ecker et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2019).
- In Aotearoa New Zealand, an exploitative housing market combined with low socioeconomic capital makes it difficult for rainbow people to obtain private rentals. For trans and gender diverse people and Indigenous people, discriminatory landlords further act as a barrier to housing access (Fraser, 2021; Vandenburg, 2022).



***“No one ever chooses to be homeless, that’s a lie... I could’ve died, [being homeless] almost killed me. Homelessness kills us people.”***

**Ngaire, trans woman, 50s**

Vandenburg, 2022

## Life while homeless

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Compared to the general population, homeless people have much higher rates of premature death, and experience higher rates of physical injury, mental illness, substance misuse, suicide, and chronic health conditions (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017).

For rainbow homeless people, experiences of violence, victimization, exploitation, ill health, and other harms are all too common (Conron, 2019; James et al., 2016; McCoy, 2018).

- Rainbow homeless youth are more than twice as likely to use substances (i.e., drugs and alcohol) as their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Baams et al., 2019; Price et al., 2019). Substance use may be a coping mechanism for events experienced while homeless and/or accessing support services.
- Sex work and survival sex—trading sex for food, a place to sleep, or other basic needs—are relatively common practices among homeless rainbow youth (AKT, 2021; Baams et al., 2019; Walls & Bell, 2011). These practices can put people at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and experiencing ill health (McCann & Brown, 2019).
- Compared to non-rainbow homeless people, rainbow people—particularly youth and trans and gender diverse people—are more likely to experience sexual abuse while homeless (Cochran et al., 2002; Cray et al., 2013; McCoy, 2018).
- Rainbow people experiencing homelessness may not seek medical care until their symptoms are quite advanced (Price et al., 2019; Vandenburg, 2022). Delays in receiving care can cause illnesses to become more complicated to treat and damaging in the long term.
- High rates of depression, suicide, and suicidal thoughts have been reported by homeless rainbow youth (Rhoades et al., 2018; Whitbeck et al., 2004).

## Barriers to support

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Even though support services are meant to provide support and safety to all people experiencing homelessness, rainbow people face various barriers that severely limit their access to homelessness and housing support services. For example:

- Homeless rainbow people are less likely to seek help or support than non-rainbow homeless people. A survey by the Albert Kennedy Trust (UK) found that less than half of rainbow young people approached community organisations while homeless (AKT, 2021). Rainbow people may avoid homelessness services out of fear of further rejection, violence, and victimisation (Abramovich 2017; McNair et al, 2017; Vandenburg, 2022).
- Abramovich (2017) describes homeless services as sites of ‘normalized oppression’, where a lack of rainbow-affirming policies and the absence of rainbow cultural competency training are considered acceptable. Some homelessness agencies even have heteronormative and cisnormative policies that further generate homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia (Abramovich, 2016; Coolhart & Brown, 2017).
- Some services are segregated by sex assigned at birth (while being reluctant to accept self-identification), meaning trans and gender diverse people must choose between an environment that is invalidating and unsafe for them or further homelessness (Coolhart & Brown, 2017).
- Reports of rainbow people experiencing homophobic and transphobic verbal and physical abuse from both staff and other service users are well documented in the literature (Abramovich, 2016; Begun & Kattari, 2016; Coolhart & Brown, 2017).
- Trans and gender diverse youth, especially trans women of color, are among the most discriminated against groups in the shelter system, having to contend with transphobia and racism simultaneously (Price et al., 2016).

To date, the lack of statutory requirements and limited resources has resulted in a complete absence of rainbow-specific services in Aotearoa New Zealand.

*“There are enough horror stories going around about [services] so you don’t risk it. You don’t want to victimise yourself, it’s not worth it.”*

**Sid, non-binary, 20s**  
Vandenburg, 2022





***“LGBTI people are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in many societies, and among those most at risk from COVID-19”***

Bachelet, 2020

## A quick look at Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted marginalized populations, particularly rainbow people (Gil et al., 2021; Konnoth, 2020; Prokopenko & Kevins, 2020).

- COVID-19 has increased unemployment and worsened housing instability, compounding socioeconomic disparities amongst rainbow people (Gil et al., 2021; Konnoth, 2020). Commenting on the situation in the United States, the Williams Institute noted that rainbow people “are more likely than the general population to live in poverty and lack access to adequate medical care, paid medical leave, and basic necessities during the pandemic” (Whittington et al., 2020).
- The isolation that COVID-19 necessitates (i.e., lockdowns, stay at home orders, self-isolation) can lead to various harms for rainbow people (Konnoth, 2020). Rainbow young people may be forced to choose between staying with hostile or violent family members, or risk exposure from insecure living arrangements (e.g., rough sleeping, couch surfing).
- An Aotearoa survey of rainbow young people’s experiences during COVID-19 Levels 3 and 4 found just over one in ten young people (13%) did not feel safe in their isolation bubble (Radford Poupard, 2021).
- Closure of regular services (e.g., rainbow support groups) puts rainbow people at risk of further harm.

Such conditions increase the likelihood of rainbow people becoming homeless. For rainbow people already experiencing homelessness, COVID-19 poses a serious risk to health:

- It can be very difficult for homeless people to adhere to public health directives such as physical distancing, isolation and quarantine (Perri et al., 2020). This increases the likelihood of exposure to COVID-19.
- People experiencing homelessness are more susceptible to COVID-19 related illnesses or death due to underlying physical and mental medical conditions, and a lack of accessible health care (Tsai & Wilson, 2020).

# Homelessness is a sticky web

Rainbow people at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness are exposed to various factors that mix and merge to create an interlocking system of oppression. It is helpful to think of this system as a sticky web (Vandenburg, 2022)—once homeless, it is harder for rainbow people to navigate support systems and find homeless ‘exits’. This means homelessness is more likely to be an enduring and reoccurring experience, rather than a ‘one-off’ event.

Lack of understanding from case workers, such as being denied a youth benefit and being told to return home to live with homophobic parents. Finding safety on the streets.

## Welfare barriers

Not being given equal consideration as a suitable candidate for job or promotion opportunities based on one’s minoritised identities. Little to no income.

## Employment barriers

Disengaging from healthcare professionals (e.g., GPs) who lack understanding about trans healthcare, while being unable to afford specialist care alternatives. Physical and mental health deteriorates.

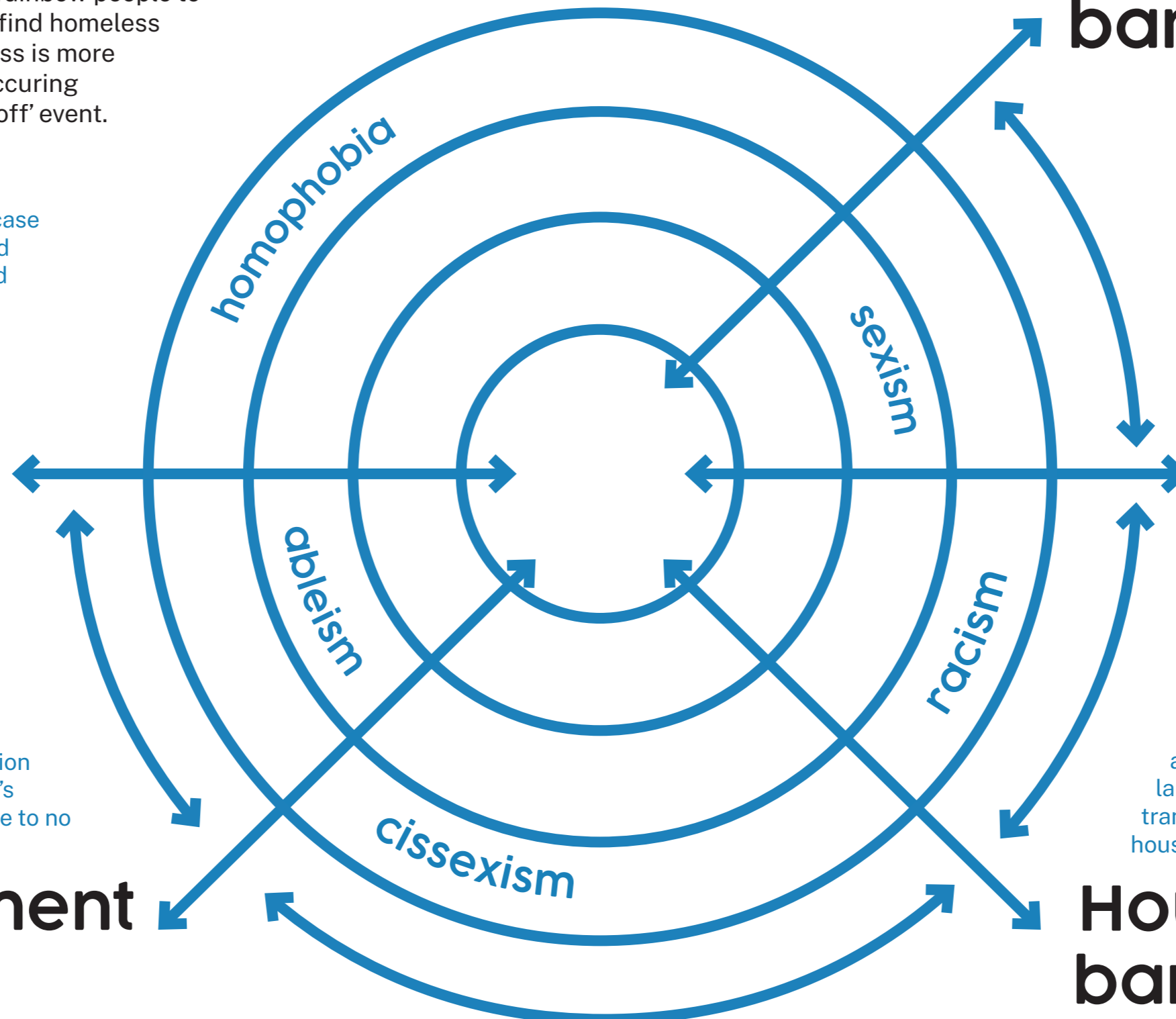
## Healthcare barriers

Dropping out of school due to homophobic and/or racist bullying, or being pushed out of a school which is lacking policies for trans inclusion. No qualifications and labelled as a ‘drop out’ for life.

## Education barriers

Not being able to find private rentals which have suitable accessibility provisions, or a landlord unwilling to rent to trans people. Face substandard housing or nowhere to live.

## Housing barriers



**It is  
time to  
shift the  
tides**



***“People need to listen to us... we have ideas that could really change everyone’s lives... our ideas will save people.”***

**Ngaire, trans woman, 50s**

Vandenburg, 2022

## Learning from communities

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Providing multiple opportunities for input from rainbow people with lived experience of homelessness, and engaging with rainbow communities more widely—especially people with multiple minoritised identities (i.e., disabled people, Indigenous communities)—is a crucial step in developing practices, policies, and services that are safe, accessible, and inclusive (Andrews & McNair, 2020; Ecker, 2017). This can be achieved by:

- Recognising and valuing people with lived experience as experts, and foster opportunities for people to share their knowledge and experiences in a safe and supportive environment.
- Establishing rainbow lived experience advisory and/or co-design group(s), and supporting leadership and development opportunities for those involved.
- Consulting and partnering with a broad range of rainbow community groups on new initiatives that promote co-design principles (Andrews & McNair, 2020).
- Ensuring appropriate feedback loops and complaints processes are in place and easily accessible.
- Introduce paid rainbow-specific roles (e.g., rainbow liaison staff) within a service organisation— this may be a helpful way to coordinate processes, support other workers, and ensure knowledge around inclusive practice is shared (Andrews & McNair, 2020). However, it is also important to prevent the burden of responsibility landing on one individual.

Far too often, people with lived experiences of homelessness are left out of the conversation and have little to no input into key decision making processes that directly affect them as service consumers (Vandenburg et al., 2021).

Consistent with these recommendations, Making Space has been designed to prioritize the contributions of rainbow people with lived experiences of homelessness.

## Recommendations from the field

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Scholars and practitioners have identified a range of best practice recommendations for housing and homelessness service providers (see, for example, AKT, 2021; Keuroghlian et al., 2014; Lambda Legal, 2009; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016; Marksamer, 2011). These include:

- Adopt and implement written policies that prohibit both discrimination and harassment against service users and staff on the basis of their actual or perceived identities (i.e., sexual orientation, gender identity).
- Rainbow competency training should be mandatory for all service staff and volunteers, not just frontline workers.
- Create and monitor goals for the hiring and retention of a diverse staff that reflects the diversity of the population served.
- Rainbow people presenting to homelessness services should be proactively offered a safe, private space in which to talk to staff members about their reasons for coming to the service.
- On intake, everyone should be asked for their chosen name and pronouns. These should be used throughout a person's interaction with the service, and opportunities should also be provided to update these on a regular basis.
- Use intake forms that include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity in the demographics section, but do not make it a requirement that people answer these questions. Note that there is some push to make collection of this information mandatory, to ensure data collection is consistent and up to date.
- Adopt written policies regarding the confidential management of sensitive personal information.
- All incoming service users should be educated by staff about the agency's non-discrimination and harassment policies, what behaviors are prohibited, and what is expected of them.
- Support rainbow people to access education, employment, and medical and mental health care.
- Trans and gender diverse people have needs that are distinct from those of the wider rainbow population. Service must be aware of these needs and offer appropriate support and referrals where necessary (i.e., for transition related medical care).
- Services working with rainbow people should provide gender-neutral facilities (i.e., toilets and changing rooms). This is a simple way to ensure that no one feels uncomfortable or unsafe while accessing facilities.
- Provide all incoming service users with information about available local social services for rainbow people.
- Services should adopt more inclusive language and imagery in their advertising and information materials.
- Encourage staff to visit other community resources and agencies to experience what will happen when a service user visits the site. This may prevent people from being referred to services which are unwelcoming or unsafe.
- Services should develop collaborations with rainbow community groups to further support the establishment of services for homeless rainbow people.
- Develop accountability standards that assess agency staff performance in supporting rainbow people. Without trained, culturally competent staff delivering services, rainbow people will continue to receive inadequate care or avoid the services they need all together.
- Consistently review and refresh service policies and strategies to ensure they are effective in supporting rainbow people.
- Offer clear evaluation and complaints pathways for service users.

## Spotlight on: Youth on Fire

Implementing best practices can have a significant impact on service provision and the experiences of those accessing support, as this excerpt from Youth on Fire illustrates:

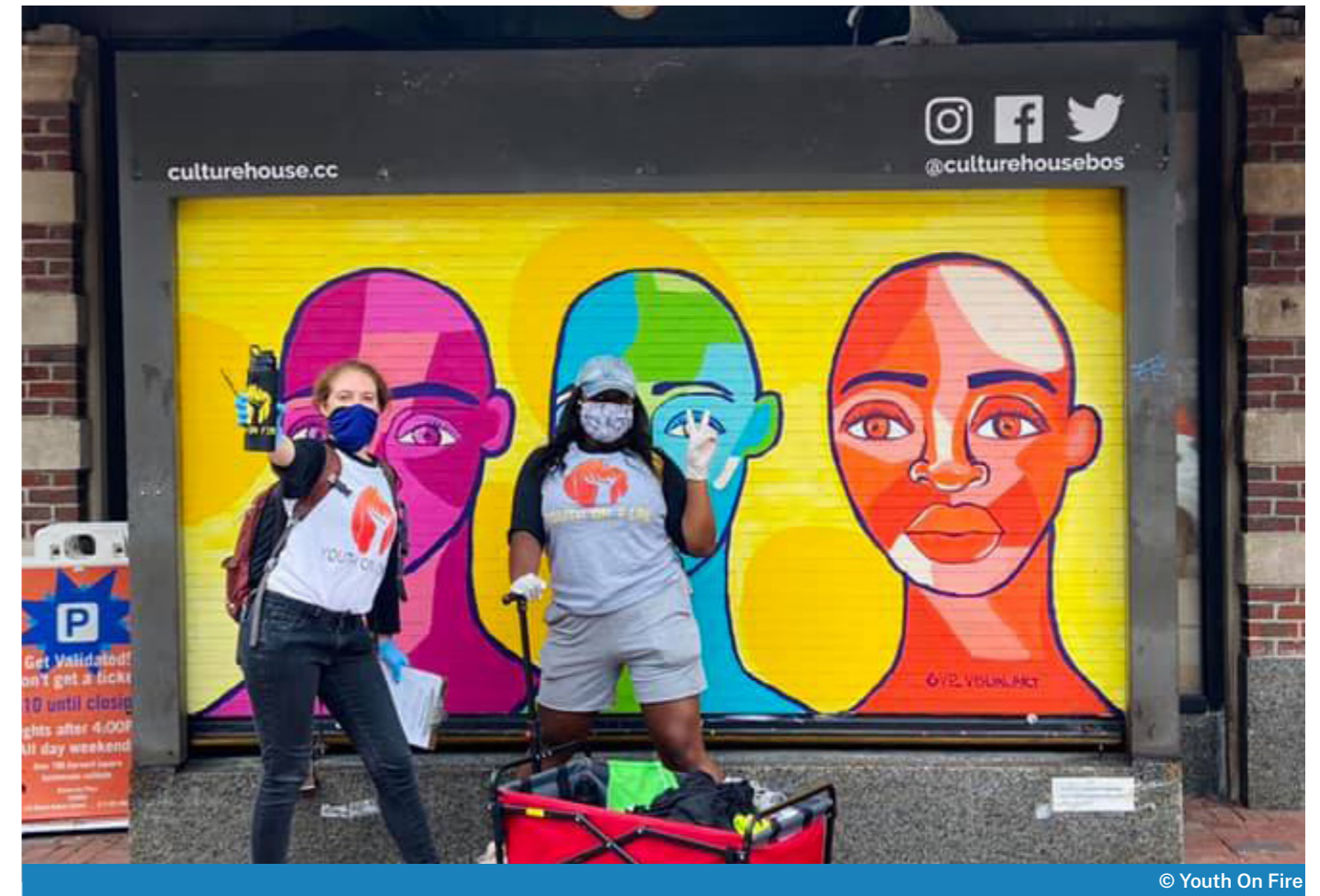
“Staff at Youth on Fire (YOF), a youth Drop-In Center in Cambridge, MA, always thought they offered a welcoming and accepting environment. However, they knew there was always room for improvement. Staff sought to understand how their drop-in center was perceived by youth experiencing homelessness and conducted a needs assessment of homeless youth in the Boston area. They were not entirely surprised to find that GLBT youth on the street did not view YOF as an accepting environment. Current GLBT members also felt that they could not find information or services to meet their needs at Youth on Fire, and even cited hostility from some of the staff.

YOF immediately responded by applying for and receiving funding from the Department of Public Health to increase the center’s capacity to serve GLBTQ youth. This included hiring an openly gay Safe Spaces Coordinator, who conducted a needs assessment of all members. They learned that 40% of their members identified as GLBT, but there were few services directed towards them. Staff ensured that service or facility changes requested during these

assessments were implemented whenever possible. They knew any overhaul implemented from the top down would have felt meaningless to the youth, but consumer-initiated strategies would be positively received.

As a result of the focus groups, YOF made simple changes to meet the needs of their members. First, they addressed the physical space. They painted a pale blue over the bright yellow walls, created more private social spaces, and brought in GLBT friendly magazines, books, and movies. They also made sure all staff knew about GLBT advocacy and support resources in the city, and fostered relationships with those groups. Staff activities such as role-playing in staff meetings helped to bring inappropriate and discriminatory staff behaviours to light.

It took three years, but staff are confident that YOF now better meets the needs of the community’s GLBT youth. It has become a preferred space for many GLBT youth experiencing homelessness.”



***“Youth on Fire’s story highlights how simple, thoughtful changes can improve services for youth who are most at risk. Their story is powerful because it is replicable. Any agency serving youth can start to make their space safe simply by asking youth about their preferences and responding to their needs.”***

## Spotlight on: Rock Trust

In Scotland, the Rock Trust, a homeless youth service, and LGBT Youth Scotland, an rainbow youth organisation, have developed a partnership to better support rainbow youth experiencing homelessness (see McMillan, 2019).

The Rock Trust is engaged in the LGBT Charter Mark, a programme of training accompanied by a review of policies, practice and resources to ensure that organisations are not only meeting legislative requirements but are as inclusive as they can be (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2018). Changes have included (but are not limited to):

- All staff, whether frontline or otherwise, receive rainbow competency training. There are also staff rainbow ‘champions’ in every department of the organisation.
- Organisational policies and procedures have been updated to explicitly condemn homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, as well as signalling legal commitments to the Equality Act.
- Intake paperwork has been updated to include young people’s chosen names and pronouns.
- The service has made a conscious effort to have visible rainbow literature and materials in all physical areas (e.g., reception signage).
- Service users and youth groups are consulted on an on-going basis regarding diversity and inclusiveness policies and practices.

The partnership between Rock Trust and LGBT Youth Scotland is an excellent example of collaboration between a homelessness organisation and a rainbow organisation. Since implementing these changes, the Rock Trust has seen an increase in rainbow young people using the service, and continues to receive referrals from LGBT Youth Scotland.



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