

Nowhere to Go:

An Exploration of LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Memphis

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Over the past few decades, American society has become more accepting of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer and questioning (LGBTQ) community. This can be seen in federal policy, such as the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality, as well as in media, where LGBTQ celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres have garnered national attention and support. But, in spite of these successes, major issues still remain. Nationwide, LGBTQ youth (18-24 year old) homelessness is a persistent problem, with studies reporting that 40% of all youths experiencing homelessness in the U.S. identify as LGBT. In spite of these high rates, homeless shelters across the country, and especially in Memphis, are unequipped or unwilling to meet these youths’ needs.

Homeless shelters are only a portion of the problem, though. The story of LGBTQ youth homelessness involves three levels of often conflicting policy at the local, state and national levels. Government agencies, youth service providers, families, religious organizations and employers all have a hand in failing these youths both by choice and by accident. These systemic failures place LGBTQ youths in a horrible position in which they have nowhere and no one to turn to during a crisis, which has dire consequences on their health, wellbeing and safety. They also force nonprofits to take the primary role in addressing the issue, despite their limited financial support and few staff members. LGBTQ youths experience homelessness and other negative consequences at higher rates than the general youth population, yet lack adequate and informed resources to address their specific needs because they exist in a society and institutions that were not made with them in mind.

In Memphis, LGBTQ youths are forced from their homes due to their identities. Many of these youths have almost no money and nowhere to stay. They have difficulty finding employment due to lack of identification, permanent address, job experience and in some cases,

drug abuse. Panhandling has been targeted by the local government, with little effort going toward helping those who engage in it. This leaves LGBTQ youths in a difficult situation, in which they may turn to dangerous means of making money. Finding shelter is also a problem in Memphis. Most shelters in the city are not free, and the few that are free are usually filled. On top of this, many shelters and their staff are ignorant to LGBTQ identities and issues, and in some cases openly discriminate. The lack of proper action by families, government and shelters leaves local nonprofit organizations like OUTMemphis with the difficult task of solving LGBTQ youth homelessness on their own, but due to a lack of funding and staff members, a solution is still a ways away. In short, Memphis has an LGBTQ youth homelessness problem, but not an LGBTQ youth homelessness solution.

To understand LGBTQ youth homelessness in Memphis, it is vital to know who qualifies as homeless nationally. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the federal legislation that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses, has established specific but complex guidelines for homeless youth and children which are not as encompassing as they need to be. To qualify as a homeless child or youth under the guidelines, an individual must be under the age of 25 and fit one of a series of criteria: “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence [and be either] sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;”, “living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations”, “living in emergency or transitional shelters,” “abandoned in hospitals,” “awaiting foster care placement, [having a] primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; [or] living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.”¹ This

definition does not include individuals who are living “doubled up” or “couch surfing,” which many youths engage in when they have no other housing option. Individuals who are engaging in these practices are considered at-risk of becoming homeless, but not homeless by HUD’s definition.² This renders them ineligible for a number of necessary programs and funding sources.

Within the large number of subgroups that make up the homeless population, one of the largest is LGBTQ youths. A 2012 study by the Williams Institute at UCLA found that forty percent of all youths experiencing homelessness in the United States identified as LGBT, in spite of the fact that the group only accounts for roughly ten percent of the general population. Sixty eight percent of the respondents in the study reported that family rejection was a major factor contributing to their homelessness, which made it the most cited factor. Fifty four percent reported that abuse by family members was another major contributing factor. The study also found that only twenty four percent of agency youth-oriented programs were designed for LGBT youth, leaving the group underserved.³ While it is difficult to determine the exact number of LGBTQ-identifying homeless youths in Memphis (for reasons that will be discussed later), the Williams Institute figure is a useful estimation that highlights how prevalent of an issue LGBTQ youth homelessness is nationwide.

Exploring LGBTQ youth homelessness as its own issue is necessary, because members of this subgroup face a number of factors that distinguish their experiences from their peers. As a result, shelters and other sources of support must be particularly cognizant of a variety of dynamics and potential challenges to avoid negative outcomes for these youths. Social environments play a large role in the health and wellbeing of youths. Despite increasing acceptance of LGBTQ people in the United States, being a young person who is a sexual or

gender minority can be difficult in a society that is largely geared toward heterosexual and cisgender individuals. Family strain based on sexual or gender orientation is a commonly cited issue among LGBTQ youths, who express strained relationships with parents due to sexual orientation, fear of victimization from family members and a lack of acceptance from socially conservative families.⁴ Victimization can also occur in schools, where LGBTQ youths report high rates of bullying, antigay victimization, and property damage and theft than their non-LGBTQ peers.⁵ Religion can also serve as an antagonizing source for LGBTQ youth, leading to internalized homophobia and transphobia when their identities are irreconcilable with religious dogma.⁶ While every individual's social environment is different, many homeless LGBTQ youths are fleeing or forced to leave a social environment that has negatively impacted their health, and it is vital that the next environment that they enter is accommodating of their identity and cognizant of their past experiences so that their health and wellbeing can improve. In Memphis, there are few places that do this, leaving LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness in the city vulnerable.

Investigations into LGBTQ specific issues are not conducted in Memphis. In the United States, researchers interested in mental and physical health in the LGBTQ community tend to favor studying other regions of the country. In the past few years, numerous studies have been conducted in the Northeast, Midwest and West, but the South has been repeatedly left out. This means that the best way to understand healthcare for Southern LGBTQ individuals is to use national data which may not be entirely generalizable, because the South has its own religious and cultural norms that shape the lives of LGBTQ individuals.

Family rejection is a particularly damaging aspect of the experiences of many LGBTQ individuals and thus exacerbates the experiences of LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness.

According to a 2009 study, lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse compared to their peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection.⁷ A separate study found that LGBT youth who lacked family support early in adolescence, even those who reported high levels of other forms of support, remained at higher risk for adverse mental health outcomes across adolescence and into young adulthood than those who had family support.⁸ Since many cases of LGBTQ youths becoming homeless are associated with family rejection, these findings indicate that this population is at severe risk for negative health outcomes. Emergency shelter staff and health care providers need to be aware of these heightened risk factors and an individual's past experiences in order to effectively address and curb potential issues. This unfortunately does not happen in Memphis.

Other negative health risk factors are associated with LGBTQ youths in comparison with their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. A 2004 study identified a number of risk factors and compared their prevalence between lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual homeless youths. Homeless LGB youths were more likely to report sexual abuse by a caretaker and sexual victimization on the street than homeless heterosexual youths. Homeless lesbian youths were more likely to report physical abuse and neglect by an adult caretaker as well as physical victimization while on their own than were their heterosexual peers. Homeless gay youths were more likely to report engaging in survival sex than their heterosexual peers. Overall, LGB homeless youths were more likely to meet criteria for major depressive episodes, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation than were homeless heterosexual youths.⁹ Beyond mental

health, LGBT homeless youth are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to trade sex with a stranger, have more than 10 sexual partners who are strangers, have sex with a stranger who uses IV drugs, have unprotected sex with a stranger and have sex with a stranger after using drugs.¹⁰ Homeless LGBTQ youths need specific programs such as encompassing sexual education and culturally competent mental health counseling, which do not really exist in Memphis.

The experiences of transgender individuals adds an additional layer of complexity to addressing those experiencing homelessness. Most significant is the need for transitional support. Homeless transgender youth wanting to transition to the gender with which they identify have few options, due to lack of healthcare coverage and expenses of transitional treatment. This leads some to turn to street hormones and silicon injections, which are unmonitored and present a major threat to the youth's health and safety.¹¹ Even if transgender youths can speak with healthcare professionals, many do not have the ability or willingness to discuss information or treatment options with transgender patients due to lack of knowledge or unwillingness to discuss the subject matter. It is vital that medical professionals have a basic understanding of what the gender affirmation process may entail for transgender patients, as well as the medical interventions that they may seek. This includes gender-affirming hormones and surgeries.¹² It is also vital that transgender youths have knowledge of healthcare facilities that they can access for little to no cost that are supportive of their unique health care needs.

On a national level, various healthcare institutions have recognized the need for LGBTQ-affirming healthcare. The Society for Adolescent Health and the American Academy of Pediatrics both published guidelines emphasizing the need for health care providers to deliver "comprehensive, confidential, and developmentally appropriate" services in a teen-friendly and

welcoming environment to this group. However, LGBTQ youths report that many healthcare providers lack the cultural competency and ability to create a positive and welcoming healthcare environment. A 2016 study exploring LGBTQ youths' experiences with health care providers found that many of the respondents experienced poor patient-provider communication, disrespect and lack of discussions about sexual health during well care visits. Most of the youths reported that their sexual orientation or gender identity was not discussed with their primary care physician, but that they were ready for and welcomed direct questions from health care providers about their sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Respondents were also concerned about physicians respecting confidentiality and some physician's inappropriate comments regarding sexual orientation or gender identity.¹³ This distrust can mean that many potential health risks will go untreated, which leads to higher rates of negative health outcomes among LGBTQ youths.

A 2014 study examined factors that impacted LGBTQ youths' experiences within different contexts and found that service providers should focus on peer led outreach versus outreach that targets churches and families in order to reach LGBTQ youths. These contexts included family, peer networks, religious organizations, schools and neighborhoods. Individual's experiences within each of these contexts were different, but overarching themes indicated that family, religious organizations and schools were more negative than positive environments for the youths, while peer networks were more positive than negative.¹⁴ These themes are important in understanding how to provide services to LGBTQ youths. For instance, since many LGBTQ youths do not find religious entities to be identity-affirming places, it may prove useful to target resources and programs toward peer related connections, as they are more likely to turn to these for support. This cultural competency is particularly important as many LGBTQ youths do not

feel comfortable in spaces that are typically deemed to be comfortable for youths, such as schools, churches and family.

While improving health and wellbeing are important elements to ending homelessness, employment is no less crucial. Unfortunately, employment for LGBTQ youths is not always simple. Currently, there is no federal legislation that prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. Tennessee also does not have any legislation on the state level that prohibits against such discrimination. The Tennessee Human Rights Act (THRA) prohibits discrimination by any employer who has 8 or more employees on the basis of race, sex, age, religion, national origin, and disability. The THRA applies to both public and private sector employees in Tennessee.¹⁵ This list notably does not include protections on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and though attempts have been made to include such protections, they have repeatedly been struck down at the state legislature.

The implication of this state law on the condition of individuals in Memphis is simple and significant. Even if localities in Tennessee wanted to provide protection to workers on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, they would be unable to do so in private sector jobs. In 2011, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a bill that bans localities from adopting nondiscrimination ordinances that apply to private sector employment if they are broader than the state's non-discrimination law.¹⁶ As a result, localities in Tennessee cannot adopt ordinances that prohibit sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination in private sector employment because the characteristics are not included in the state's non-discrimination law. This lack of legal protection leaves LGBTQ private sector workers vulnerable.

Despite this resistance from the state government, a number of localities, public universities and private corporations in Tennessee have adopted local ordinances and internal

policies that prohibit such discrimination against employees.¹⁷ The City of Memphis has one such ordinance, as do a number of companies that employ workers here, including FedEx and AutoZone.¹⁸ However, many companies do not have such policies which leaves many LGBTQ Memphians vulnerable to employment discrimination.

The need for such legal protection has been forcefully demonstrated on a national level. The Williams Institute investigated the occurrence of LGBT discrimination lawsuits in states that had anti-LGBT discrimination statutes. They found that LGBT workers filed employment discrimination lawsuits at similar rates as workers of color and female workers. On average, approximately 4.6 complaints of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination are filed for every 10,000 LGBT workers each year, compared to approximately 4.9 complaints of race discrimination filed for every 10,000 workers of color, and 3.7 complains of sex discrimination filed for every 10,000 female workers.”¹⁹ Though the amount of LGBTQ workers is considerably smaller than the amount of female workers or workers of color, this finding underscores the importance of LGBTQ protections, because they still face discrimination at similar rates. So, while many people point to jobs as the way out of homelessness, the lack of protections for LGBTQ workers and the persistent issue of employment discrimination means that LGBTQ homeless youths may struggle to find secure employment opportunities.

Since finding employment can be difficult for LGBTQ youths, some turn elsewhere for income and to meet basic needs. When youths become homeless, they have few options to turn to in order to survive. They face job discrimination, lack employment experience, a permanent address and identification, which are all barriers to employment. Discrimination and lack of service care providers also pushes them away from homeless shelters and other avenues of aid. This leaves these youths vulnerable to becoming a part of the sex trade.

Research conducted by the Urban Institute in New York City explored the complexities of LGBTQ youths engaged in trading sex. Through interviews, researchers were able to better understand the role of social networks, personal circumstance, governmental institutions and shelter systems in creating a system in which many LGBTQ youths turned to trading sex. Some youths engaged in survival sex, which occurs when an individual exchanges their body for basic subsistence needs, including clothing, food and shelter.²⁰ Other youths were coerced into the sex trade by abusers who exploited their vulnerable circumstances. Though many youths wanted to stop trading sex, many found that it was difficult to do so. Many of these youths had already been ostracized because of their LGBTQ identity and their status as a homeless individual, and once they began trading sex, they were pushed even further aside by society, which only served to perpetuate the behavior.²¹

The study found that peer networks play a large role in getting LGBTQ youths started in trading sex. Many of the respondents belonged to a network of other homeless LGBTQ youths, which included youths who engaged in trading sex. This connection with others engaged in the sex trade paved the way for youths to get involved themselves. In fact the most common way that the youths in this study reported first becoming involved in trading sex was through friends and peers.²² In these social circles, trading sex became normalized and youths' bodies became commodities with which they could meet their needs.²³

One of the primary reasons that runaway and homeless youths are specifically targeted for recruitment into the sex trade is due to their emotional vulnerability. Many have strained relationships with parents and family and do not get adequate love and support from elsewhere. These youths may start out in a relationship with someone who do not believe in an

exploiter, but then be coerced into prostitution and other sex acts as they desperately seek basic needs and emotional support.²⁴

Mychell Mitchell, a Victim Specialist at the Federal Bureau of Investigation Memphis Office, explained the forms of manipulation that traffickers use in order to exploit youths. She stated that traffickers use psychological forms of control on their victims. They find out their victims' vulnerabilities and exploit them, which perpetuates the system of human trafficking and traffickers' control. Traffickers also retain control over their victims through emotional exploitation. Many of the victims do not have close relationships with anyone else, and the traffickers serve as a source of emotional support for them. In the LGBTQ community, this is even worse, as traffickers are often the only people that have shown acceptance of the victims' identity. Traffickers are always searching for new and young victims, as the commercial sex market constantly demands it, and the best way to recruit is through peers. After developing control over a victim, traffickers will use them to recruit others. So, psychologically and emotionally manipulated victims will search out vulnerable potential victims and bring them back to the trafficker, leading to a system of constant recruitment and trafficking perpetuation.²⁵

As discussed in the Urban Institute study, many youths reported wanting to stop trading sex, because it was unsafe, demeaning and stigmatizing. Numerous youths reported being sexually and physically assaulted, raped and robbed by clients, exploiters and other youths. They also reported feelings of being demeaned and mental and physical health issues that resulted from trading sex. This feeling of demeaning oneself extended to a societal level, as youths felt that by disclosing their activities, they would be stigmatized by society at large, which made seeking help difficult.²⁶

Mitchell echoed these sentiments, stating that victims of sex trafficking in Memphis are unlikely to come forth to break the cycle for a number of reasons. It is unlikely that these youths would turn to a shelter, as shelters have strict rules and rigid structures that turn many youth away from them. They value their freedom and relative independence, and a shelter forces them to abide by their set of rules, which is difficult for them to do. She noted that LGBTQ youths are particularly vulnerable, because they have a fear of coming forth due to their identity. They do not want to be made into a public spectacle, and they fear that coming forth and presenting their experiences in court would do exactly that.²⁷

The participants in the Urban Institute study identified a few key elements that they needed to stop trading sex. The three main things that the youths reported needing were employment, any or better housing and education. A smaller number of the respondents reported needing self-improvement or some type of counseling or support in order to stop. Many of those who reported needing services to change their lives also reported needing help obtaining the services. Poor experiences with service providers in the past had also made youths hesitant to seek support in the future.²⁸

Mitchell identified drug rehabilitation as another major barrier to terminating involvement in the sex trade. From her experience, many of the youths that trade sex in Memphis have drug dependencies, which makes finding them help more difficult. She is hesitant to place these youths into shelters, as doing so would place their safety at risk. She is also hesitant to rent them a hotel, because the per diem that she can give them only covers food and basic supplies. Since many of these youths have drug addictions and no money to buy drugs, they would most likely turn back to trading sex for extra cash. In some cases, the only option left for these youths

is to find them a detox center. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find someone a bed at a detox center if they lack insurance and money, which most homeless people do.²⁹

Given these significant challenges, it is even more frustrating that LGBTQ youths face additional problems in finding shelters designed for them. In Memphis, there is no dedicated youth homeless shelter, the shelters that do exist are often filled to capacity, and some are explicitly not queer-friendly. While the situation in Memphis is particularly stark, this is a national problem: Even in New York City, with its progressive political reputation and array of services for people experiencing homelessness, there is a shortage of available shelter and transitional housing shelters that serve youths. Most that are available have time limits, and longer-term housing programs have wait lists. In Memphis, as elsewhere, this lack of available shelter forces youths to stay on or return to the streets.³⁰

The longer and more often that children and youths are on the streets, the more likely they are to become victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Runaway and homeless youths are more likely to be victims of commercial sexual exploitation due to age and circumstances than other segments of the population. High numbers of youth who are homeless report being solicited for prostitution and pimps have been known to actively target locations where homeless children and youth congregate. This includes on the streets, at foster care group homes, and at runaway and homeless shelter programs. Since children and youths also engage in recruitment, it can take place between peers within environments that are typically deemed to be safe places.³¹

Tennessee state law considers minors involved in the sex trade to be victims of sex trafficking, no matter their circumstances, but past the age of 18, the status of victim changes. Youths who engage in trading sex as a result of force, fraud, or coercion are considered to be victims of commercial sexual exploitation.³² However, this must be proven in court in order to

avoid criminal charges. If force, fraud or coercion cannot be proven or has not occurred, as in the case of youths who engage in survival sex, then youths are considered to be committing a criminal act and face legal repercussions.³³ Even though youths may be trading sex to meet basic needs, law enforcement and legal systems still view them as criminals. So, the youths who are caught are more likely to be arrested and jailed than receive therapeutic help or social services that they need.³⁴ This presents another barrier to youths, who are hesitant to interact with law enforcement and service providers for fear of prosecution, even though they only did what they needed to survive.

It is thus vital that policymakers, law enforcement and youth service providers understand the complexities of the sex trade. Criminalizing and stigmatizing the youths that engage in it only serves to further marginalize an already marginalized group. These youths are not engaging in the sex trade because they want to break the law or risk their lives, they are doing it because it is the only option that they have or only option they know to survive in a world that repeatedly denies them the essentials to survive. The solution to ending survival sex is not arresting the youths that engage in it, it is providing a viable alternative so that selling oneself is not the only way to survive. Unfortunately, help and support for these youths are at risk of disappearing.

In 2017, a significant change occurred in national politics that could lead to substantial reverberations in cities like Memphis. Dr. Ben Carson's appointment as secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) could contribute to the further denial of the reality of LGBTQ youth homelessness in Memphis. HUD is a federal agency headquartered in Washington, D.C. that impacts cities and communities across the U.S. Carson has a history of anti-LGBTQ comments and opinions, and these have remained unchanged in his position as

HUD secretary. Dr. Carson was asked for his views on the housing rights of LGBT people, and whether he believed that HUD had a responsibility to provide equal housing rights to LGBT people. Carson responded by saying that he would “enforce all the laws of the land,” but that he would not support LGBT people receiving “extra rights.” This is a troubling answer, because what Carson seems to believe are extra rights are in reality protections to ensure equal rights; A protection based on gender or sexual orientation is not an extra right, but rather an insurance of equal rights.

Carson’s views are important, because he is the leader of the federal department that closely works with homeless people, and his views and opinions could have a significant impact on local programs and contribute to negative consequences for LGBTQ homeless youths in Memphis. As signaled by the language of “extra rights,” HUD has signaled a turn away from its recent commitment to protecting the rights of LGBTQ individuals. In 2016, HUD issued a finalized ruling to ensure that equal access to housing and services were available to all regardless of gender identity. This ruling provided transgender people with the right to equal access to shelters based on their gender identity, and was released alongside documents detailing how emergency shelters were to stay in accordance with it. After Carson took office in early 2017, at least six of these documents were removed from the HUD website. During a hearing with the House Appropriations Committee, Carson was asked why the documents were removed and not replaced with anything. He claimed that HUD’s policy was to ensure that “no one is discriminated against,” and that the only reason anything would be removed from the website would be so it can be examined to “determine whether it is effective.” When asked for a timeline of replacing the documents, Carson replied that they would be available “as soon as possible.”³⁵ Currently, there is no replacement for these documents and it is unclear as to when and if one

will be available. In the meantime, these previous protections are at risk of not being enforced, which can lead to poor outcomes for homeless transgender people seeking emergency shelter. Particularly in a place like Memphis, where state laws are designed to restrict LGBTQ access, this new HUD position is a dangerous step back.

Even more pressingly, it could result in a massive reduction of funding for local organizations reliant on HUD support. In Memphis, HUD provides funding to various organizations through the Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA), Continuum of Care (CoC), Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Emergency Shelter Grant (ESG) and HOME Investment Partnership programs. In 2017, these funding sources will provide the city with a combined total of over \$10 million, a massive and important influx of federal funds to the city.³⁶

While HUD funds multiple programs in Memphis, the Continuum of Care (CoC) program is most closely related to issues of homelessness. The CoC provides funding for homeless shelters and rapid re-housing programs at the national level. In Shelby County, the Community Alliance for the Homeless (CAFTH) is the primary organization that works with this program. CAFTH holds meetings every month that include homeless service providers and other community members that work with homeless individuals to discuss issues, funding, HUD regulations and deadlines. CAFTH plays an important role in HUD funding to Shelby County, which many organizations rely on to stay open and functioning.

One marker of CAFTH's significance, but also its limitation, is the fact that-while Shelby County is home to over 15 different homeless shelters,-none of them meet the specific needs of the LGBTQ youth population. Each shelter serves a distinct population. Some are dedicated specifically to serving veterans, some address alcohol and drug abuse and others address family

homelessness. All of the shelters are segregated by sex, with the exception of ones that accept couples and families. Almost none of the shelters are free, and the few that are free are usually filled to capacity. The remaining shelters have nightly rates that range from \$5 to \$10 a night. Almost all of the shelters are run by religious organizations and have a strong religious affiliation. The Memphis Union Mission and the Calvary Rescue Mission, the two largest men's shelters in Memphis, even have mandatory church service every night for their guests. Since these shelters are run by religious organizations, they receive funding entirely from private donations, and receive no funding from the government. Thus, they have free rein to choose their clients and how they treat them. This means that minority groups, such as LGBTQ individuals and youths, often fall under the radar of the shelter system or are openly discriminated against by shelter staff.³⁷ This is why Shelby County desperately needs a dedicated youth shelter, especially one that serves LGBTQ youths. Comprehensive training for shelter staff is also needed as it pertains to LGBTQ issues and identities.

One of the key participants in the community recognizes this disjunction as a major problem in Memphis. As a member of the Shelby County CoC system, Stephanie Reyes works with individuals experiencing homelessness in Memphis and attempts to find them safe places to stay. Many of the people who call or walk through the doors of OUTMemphis seeking help finding shelter identify as LGBTQ. She revealed the difficulties that many of these LGBTQ individuals, particularly transgender people and youths, face when they seek shelter in Memphis:

“[I called a men's shelter in town] for a trans male client, because his ID still said female, so I called them and was like 'Is this going to be a problem? We have a transgender male client, would he be allowed into the shelter?' and the guy was like 'I don't know what you're talking about' and I was like, 'He's transgender so his ID says female' and so he

said 'You know, he can come in as long as he doesn't act gay' and I was like, 'Okay, well he's not gay, he's transgender' and he was like 'I don't know what that means' and then I was like, 'Thanks, never mind.' Obviously that's not a good space...”³⁸

Unfortunately, this kind of treatment is commonplace in Memphis, which makes finding a shelter that an LGBTQ person can feel safe at nearly impossible. Many of Memphis’ shelter staff are ignorant of LGBTQ issues, especially the unique role that transgender identity and government-issued identification play in the lives and experiences of transgender people experiencing homelessness. This ignorance on the part of shelter staff makes entry into shelters complicated and difficult for transgender individuals, many of whom still have IDs that do not reflect their gender identity. This is a particular problem in shelters as a form of ID is usually needed for entry.

While some shelter staff were ignorant of what being transgender meant, others were willing to deny service based solely on the fact that the person seeking shelter was transgender:

“...I called another place, which was a women's shelter, which was very religiously run and I said 'I have a trans female, she's looking for shelter for tonight' and they said 'We don't approve of that lifestyle,' and they hung up on me. So, there's really not anywhere that I can say 'yes, they'll go there and they'll be safe.'”³⁹

Reyes expanded further upon the claim that transgender individuals especially do not have a safe shelter or space to sleep in in Memphis:

“Our trans clients do not have a place to go, there is nowhere in the city that I can say 'You can go there and be safe,' and I tell them up front 'You can sleep in your car, which sucks and it's not safe at all, or you can go to this men's shelter and pay \$7 to stay there,

but the last time that we sent someone there, they got sexually assaulted in the bathroom, because they are a trans female that presents completely female,' like walking down the street you would not know that was a transgender client. And so going into a men's shelter where there are a lot of people who have a mental illness or drug and alcohol problems or just have a variety of reasons why they are there in the first place, they are not always going to be super welcoming and accepting of someone like that."⁴⁰

Not only do homeless transgender individuals in Memphis struggle to find a shelter whose staff is willing to accept them, when they do find a shelter they face physical and sexual violence as a result of their identity within the shelter itself. This leaves them with the difficult prospect of deciding between sleeping on the streets, which is incredibly unsafe, or sleeping in a shelter, which is also incredibly unsafe. There is really no good option.

Attempting to accurately count the number of homeless individuals in Memphis is a difficult task. Homeless youth and children are incredibly difficult to count for a number of reasons, and within that subset, LGBTQ youth and children are even more difficult to count, because being easily visible presents a threat to their safety. It is difficult to quantify the number of youths experiencing homelessness in Memphis, which is one of the reasons that a specific youth shelter does not yet exist. The primary tool for counting the number of homeless people and assigning funding is the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, collected by HUD each year. The PIT surveys vary from city to city, with the only national guidelines being that the data collected must include age, race and gender for each recorded person. The system is riddled with flaws. To collect the data, volunteers travel to different sites around the city and ask any homeless person they see to fill out a short survey. The count is only conducted once a year in the middle of January. Since it is only collected on one of the coldest days of the year, this means that anyone

who has access to a car or a friend's couch is likely to be inside, and thus remain uncounted even though they are homeless. As a result, the PIT system heavily favors counting those in emergency shelters and transitional housing over those living in cars and couch surfing, leading to Shelby County PIT data claiming incredibly low rates of unsheltered homeless youths.

This presents a large problem with regard to funding, as both private and public investors base their funds on the numbers provided by PIT counts. So, this population is underrepresented in counts because they lack shelter. Then, they receive no funding or other resources through the course of the year, because the data says that they do not constitute a large enough portion of the population to receive this support. So, when the PIT count is conducted the following year, they are once again not counted, because they are unsheltered. This creates a system in which a population is unheard and unaided, even though data comparisons strongly suggest that they exist in larger numbers and need help.

Last year, the Shelby County PIT count reported that there were 63 unaccompanied youth and children experiencing homelessness in the county on any given night. This number loses any credibility when it is compared with other localities. For instance, Atlanta's 2016 PIT count reported 347 unaccompanied youth and children⁴¹, a number that is 5 times higher than Shelby County's. This difference seems unlikely considering the fact that Atlanta has a population of roughly half of Shelby County's, 420,003 residents compared to 938,803 residents according to 2010 census data.⁴² While Atlanta does have a higher poverty rate than Shelby County, 24.6% compared to 21.4%,⁴³ the large differences in homeless populations still seems unlikely. The two localities also reported similar unsheltered rates. Shelby County's unsheltered rates for unaccompanied youths and children was 4.8%, while Atlanta's was 5.2%.⁴⁴ Atlanta has a shelter that is specifically dedicated to homeless youths, while Memphis does not. It is unlikely that a

city that actually specifically addresses youth homelessness can shelter the same percentage of their youth homeless population as a city that does not. These factors, taken together, show that Shelby County's PIT data is flawed and inaccurate.

When comparing Shelby County's PIT data with counties that have taken concerted efforts to more accurately count youths and children, it becomes clear that there must be a considerable portion of the homeless population that is not being accounted for due to being unsheltered. In 2016, Clark County, Nevada reported 1,531 unaccompanied youth and children⁴⁵, a number that is 24 times larger than Shelby County's. While Clark County does contain about twice as many people as Shelby County, 2.07 million compared to 938,803 people, Shelby County only having 1/24 of the number of homeless youths is a claim that seems unlikely, especially since Clark County's poverty rate is 15.7% compared to Shelby County's 21.4%.⁴⁶ The key factor in the two county's PIT count differences lies in the reported rates of unsheltered youth and children. While Shelby County claimed only 4.8% unsheltered, Clark County reported a remarkable 86% unsheltered rate.⁴⁷ This difference, coupled with the efforts that Clark County took to be more accurate, and the lack of efforts in Shelby County, further show that the Shelby County PIT data does not accurately represent the number of unsheltered homeless youths.

To address this problem, Shelby County should take steps similar to those taken by Clark County to accurately address the needs of the homeless youth population. Clark County's approach to accurately counting homeless youths had a number of components to it. At the start of the PIT counting process, the Las Vegas/Clark County Continuum of Care (LVCC CoC) put together a special team of youth service providers and homeless and formerly homeless youths. With this team present from the start of the process, the LVCC CoC was able to ensure that the PIT count process maintained a youth focus. The LVCC CoC also assembled focus groups while

planning the PIT count. The purpose of these focus groups was to help identify where volunteers should look for homeless youths, including malls, parks, recreation centers and restaurants. These focus groups also provided insight into ways in which volunteers could identify homeless youths.

While PIT counts are usually conducted at night or during the very early morning, the youth count was conducted during the day. By counting during the day, youths were more likely to be noticeable and a more accurate count could be generated. Another benefit to the day count was that the LVCC CoC was able to partner with the local school district. While the CoC volunteers were out conducting the PIT count during school hours, the schools were conducting a count of their own. Part of the data that the schools collected included information on where the youths had slept the night before.⁴⁸ This information was then used by CoC workers to determine which youths fit HUD's definition of homelessness, adding more people to the count.

Youth Count!, a federal initiative including participation from multiple agencies, has also come up with a number of strategies to better count LGBTQ-identifying youths. Some of these promising strategies included partnering with LGBTQ agencies, conducting counts in places that LGBTQ youth frequent, showing signs of support through positive messaging, like rainbows, pink triangles and safe zone stickers, and inclusion of youths in the count's design and administration process. In the communities where these strategies were tested, the number of LGBTQ youths who were counted saw a marked increase.⁴⁹

Noticing the inaccuracies in the Shelby County PIT count's youth data, members of OUTMemphis began taking steps toward making the count more accurate. The first Shelby County Youth Count took place in 2015. That year, it was incredibly small and only included about 30 volunteers and 15 locations around the city. After the first year, the Community

Alliance for the Homeless (CAFTH) joined forces with OUTMemphis. CAFTH conducts the adult PIT count in Memphis and partnered because they also wanted to collect more accurate information to present to HUD. The Workforce Investment Network (WIN), a community resource that provides job training programs and connects job seekers with employers, has also joined forces in the youth count. Together, the three organizations plan and carry out the youth count each year.⁵⁰

In addition to orchestrating the youth count, these three organizations have also constructed the Youth Housing Partnership Board (YHPB). YHPB consists of anyone ages 13 to 24 who has experienced homelessness or who is interested in solving youth homelessness in Shelby County. The board meets twice a month and they set the tone for what the provider youth committee works on to ensure that the agency is making decisions with youth input to provide better services and in the case of the PIT count, be more accurate and encompassing.⁵¹ Combined with OUTMemphis, CAFTH and WIN, these efforts are a great start toward getting an accurate count of homeless youths living in Shelby County. While the Shelby County Youth Count is gaining traction each year and the numbers are slowly becoming more accurate, there is still room for improvement.

In spite of Shelby County's glaring PIT count shortcomings, Memphis and Shelby County are still being praised as national leaders in the area of youth homelessness. In the 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, Memphis/Shelby County was specifically mentioned in a section about local Continuums of Care with the lowest rates of unsheltered unaccompanied homeless youths alongside Atlanta.⁵² This federal publication suggests that Memphis is a national leader in the area of youth homelessness, while in reality it is only a national leader in inaccurately counting youths and allocating them almost nothing.

The Annual Homeless Assessment Report also recognized that there were issues in counting unaccompanied homeless youths and children and that many communities were improving their PIT data collection to be more accurate. It went on to say that the 2017 PIT count data would be used as the benchmark through which HUD and its federal partners will measure future trends in the number of youths experiencing homelessness.⁵³ Currently, the 2017 PIT count data has not been published, so it is not possible to know the baseline through which youth homelessness in Memphis will be judged going into the future. Since the data is still not sufficient, though, it is deeply flawed to use it as a baseline.

Over the past few years, the Memphis city government has taken a number of steps to combat the issue of homelessness in the city. In 2010, former Memphis mayor A.C. Wharton proposed the “Action plan to End Homelessness in Memphis and Shelby County.” This plan coincided with the federal government’s program, “Opening Doors: The Federal Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.” The Memphis Action Plan contained a number of ambitious goals such as ending chronic homelessness in Memphis in five years, preventing and ending family and youth homelessness in Memphis in ten years and preventing and ending veteran homelessness in Memphis in five years.

This action plan is still in use by the city government and the Shelby County CoC, and a number of its goals have been met. A comprehensive intake process has been implemented by all shelters in the area and progress has been made in ending veteran and chronic homelessness in the area, with the number of homeless veterans and chronically homeless individuals in the county decreasing year after year. However, the action plan failed to adequately address youth homelessness and the population still remains in a problematic position as a result.

The action plan's second goal-preventing and ending family and youth homelessness in Memphis-barely mentioned youth homelessness at all. Nearly the entire section was dedicated to issues faced by families experiencing homelessness, and the only portion specifically addressing youth homelessness called for an establishment of a transition-in-place resource for homeless youth who had aged out of foster care and who did not qualify for DCS housing and support services, programs that serve parolees and probationers. But this is only a fraction of the youth homeless population. The plan also called for school districts to reallocate their funding to triple the amount of school-based resources for homeless children in city schools,⁵⁴ which is a nonsensical solution considering the lack of funding that these schools are already facing. This action plan was the most in-depth policy solution published by the Memphis city government, and it completely failed to address the complex issues faced by the homeless youth population. In particular, LGBTQ homeless youths are never mentioned in the document, and they constitute a large portion of that population.

While the leadership in the Memphis city government changed hands in January 2016, with the election of Jim Strickland, the lack of mayoral action remained the same. It was clear from the platform that Mayor Strickland ran on in 2015 that addressing homelessness would not be a priority. The document that he released for his campaign only briefly mentioned homelessness in the city, spending roughly 2 of the document's 31 pages talking about his perceived issues and solutions to the problem. In those 2 pages, Strickland said that his main goal with regard to homelessness in the city was to end veteran homelessness. He also briefly mentioned youth homelessness, although not in any concrete ways. Strickland ended his brief discussion of Memphis homelessness by stating, "Additionally, certain populations such as unaccompanied youth, minors with children of their own, and minors who are victims of

domestic violence, lack adequate help and support. These gaps in service coverage should be filled.”⁵⁵ It is promising that he at least mentioned that these populations had unique needs that were not being met, but the fact that he did not at all mention the LGBTQ homeless youth population showed that his administration would most likely ignore the group. His final statement about needing to fill the gaps in service coverage also does not provide any insight into how these gaps will be filled or who will fill them.

Since taking office, Mayor Strickland has done little to combat homelessness in Memphis. In August 2016, the mayor unveiled a program to put Memphis panhandlers to work. The program, “Work Local,” uses vans to transport willing panhandlers to sites around the city to clean up trash and blight. The program takes place twice a week and provides workers with \$9 an hour and a meal. The Memphis city government is partnering with the Hospitality Hub, a nonprofit organization that links homeless and imminently homeless individuals with services throughout the city. Strickland gave a brief description of the initiative, stating that “It gives money to stay at a shelter. Hopefully, it gives them a job that can lead to a career job, and lift them out of poverty and lift them out of homelessness. That’s the real goal.”⁵⁶ But, if the real goal is to lift people out of homelessness and provide them with a career, then this program is simply not enough. Brad Watkins, the Executive Director of the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center, criticized “Work Local,” stating “If you want to talk about jobs, then let’s talk about real living wage jobs where people could afford to get out of poverty. Now, you’re just providing income for people who are still going to be on the streets.”⁵⁷ As of April 2017, “Work Local” had only managed to find permanent jobs for 3 former panhandlers.⁵⁸ Memphis has over 1,500 homeless individuals, so while finding a job for 3 people is good, it does little to actually lower homelessness rates. With time, more programs like “Work Local” may be implemented, but for

now, there is a severe lack of necessary resources and programs to end homelessness in Memphis. Inability to find work is not the only driving force behind prolonged homelessness; Lack of affordable housing and lack of a living wage also play a large role in hindering economic mobility and ending homelessness, but are not being properly addressed. By targeting panhandling, this program only furthered the city government's agenda of limiting the visibility of homelessness, rather than the root causes of the issue.

At around the same time that "Work Local" was being launched, the Memphis City Council voted to change the city's existing panhandling ordinance. In October 2016, the council voted 9-3 in favor of a change that banned panhandling in certain areas and at certain times within city limits. Specifically, the ordinance bans panhandling near healthcare facilities, banks, ATMs, outdoor dining areas, marked crosswalks, bus stops, public benches, monuments and traffic. Individuals who violate the ban are fined \$50. The city council claimed that the changes were to combat "aggressive panhandling," and that the ordinance change was a matter of public safety.⁵⁹ The \$50 fine attached to the ban is irrational, because many of the panhandlers are doing so because they do not have money. In order to enforce this ordinance change, police resources would need to be diverted to fining a marginalized group who cannot afford fines. Instead of improving public safety, this ordinance change criminalizes those experiencing homelessness who have few other resources to turn to in Memphis, while at the same time wasting police resources on an imagined issue of "aggressive panhandling." Rather than fining panhandlers for attempting to make enough money to survive, these resources could be better spent elsewhere, such as lowering the real issue of Memphis' high homicide rate. Fear for public safety may not be the reason that the ordinance was changed, though. The city council members may believe that the panhandling ban can limit the visibility of the homeless population in

Memphis, and thus attract more investors to the city. The visibility of homeless individuals is a threat to potential investors in areas like Midtown and Downtown, so pushing panhandlers to different areas in the city and limiting when they can panhandle helps to secure investments in other areas of Memphis, while also downplaying the realities of the city. This ordinance change damages LGBTQ youths as well, as their difficulties finding gainful employment means that they are more likely to participate in the informal panhandling economy.

Since the city government and the current shelter system has failed to adequately address the situation faced by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in Memphis, OUTMemphis has taken it upon themselves to come up with a solution. For years, the staff of OUTMemphis were aware of the dire circumstances that these youths faced, and have tried a few different approaches to address the issue. The community center's first approach to combatting LGBTQ youth homelessness came in the form of a host family program, planning for which began in 2008. Thirty people attended the meetings at the beginning of the planning process, but after six months that number had declined to only four. The initial plan for the program was that LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness would go to the host family's house for 2 weeks to 3 months and then they would have an apartment, job and a secure future by the end of that time frame. This proved to me a naïve approach for a number of reasons. Deb Word, who ended up serving as the host mother for over seventeen LGBTQ youths from 2009 to 2015, explained the complexities of the program and how it ended up evolving. "Will [Batts, Executive Director of OUTMemphis] has always said 'you were supposed to shelter them, not adopt them,' but the problem is, when you have a vulnerable child, and an 18 year old is still a child, who comes to depend on you for his emotional support, it is very difficult to say '3 months, goodbye, good luck.'"⁶⁰ What many of these youths needed went beyond shelter and beyond 3 months.

The reasons that the seventeen youths ended up at the Word's door varied as did their lengths of stay. The first people who stayed with the Words were a young lesbian couple and their son. Due to a series of events, they found themselves without a safe place to sleep. In 2008, they both lost their jobs due to the recession and downsizing. Then, a tree hit their rental house and forced them to couch surf with friends in Whitehaven, and one night that they were staying there, "...bullets had come through the house because the next door neighbor was a crack house." So, with their infant son, these two packed up their car and drove to OUTMemphis and asked for permission to park their car in the driveway and sleep there. When Mrs. Word heard about the situation, she offered to house the three. They only stayed with the Words for 2 weeks, at which point their next housing arrangement came through and they were safe and independent once more. However, not all of the youths that stayed with the Words were able to become independent so quickly.⁶¹

Some youths needed longer term support from the Words due to financial barriers to independence. Even if the youths wanted to work and be independent, the process of finding a job, saving money and moving out took time that could expand beyond the initial 3 month period. "What we found was, even if it was somebody who wanted to work, it was 2-3 weeks before whoever gets your paperwork into HR. A month and a half maybe before you get a first paycheck, from the time you get to my door, and then you have to have \$1,000 to move out, basically. First and last month's rent, utility deposit,"⁶² and any outstanding debts. Getting a job and saving up money was not the only barrier that these youths faced, though.

Mental health and behavioral issues also presented barriers to youth independence. "More than once, we've had kids who have had emotional issues that were probably long-term, but most came with some sort of an emotional baggage from just being kicked out, parent rejected."

The emotional baggage and behavioral issues that Mrs. Word described manifested themselves in a number of ways with the various youths. Some had behavioral issues that made them difficult to house. Others had undiagnosed mental illnesses that were impeding their ability to live on their own and get and maintain a steady job.⁶³

Word described one situation that spoke to the particular set of challenges facing LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in Memphis and elsewhere. From the time he was a teenager, this youth had been repeatedly subject to emotional and physical abuse by family members due to his sexual orientation. His mother was HIV positive and she was angry with him for “choosing to be gay while the gay disease was killing her.” So, she threw him out of the house several times from the time he was 16 on. He ended up in foster care until he turned 18, at which point his grandmother offered to house him. On the second day that he was staying there, the grandmother said “I thought you were kidding about the gay thing,” and the next morning, he awoke to her pouring oil on him to “anoint the gay away.”⁶⁴ The emotional and physical trauma that this youth had gone through before ending up at the Word’s door left him in a vulnerable and defensive position. He needed mental health services, emotional support, and guidance in life that typically comes from a parent, not just a place to stay for two weeks to three months.

As important as the Words were in addressing individual cases, they and OUTMemphis soon came to the realization that the host family program was not a viable permanent solution to the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness in Memphis, so they began working on a homeless shelter and drop-in center now known as the Metamorphosis Project. This project-modeled after programs in other cities⁶⁵ - has three components to it: a drop-in center for youths who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, an emergency shelter for LGBTQ youths, and a rapid re-housing program.

The drop-in center of the Metamorphosis Project will be an expanded version of OUTMemphis' Youth Emergency Services (YES) program. Currently, the YES program provides food, hygiene supplies, clothes, internet access, storage, case management, and other services as needed to homeless or struggling LGBTQ youths ages 18 to 25. When the Metamorphosis Project opens, this list will be expanded. So far, HIV testing has been added to the list of services and Mrs. Reyes is working toward partnering with the Workforce Investment Network (WIN) to conduct career services, as well as creating space for workshops and group and individual counseling.⁶⁶ The purpose of the drop-in center is to provide a one-stop shop for all homeless or at risk youths to connect them with resources and service care providers. Such a resource does not yet exist in Memphis, and this center is a vital step toward improving the lives of Memphis' homeless youth population.

The emergency shelter is the second component to the Metamorphosis Project and is specifically for homeless LGBTQ youths. Initially, the shelter was going to be constructed in Orange Mound, but after a public meeting with members of the community, it became clear that Orange Mound would not be a safe and supportive environment for the shelter. At the meeting, residents of Orange Mound expressed their unhappiness with the project because it was a homeless shelter, it was for youth and it was for LGBT individuals. Luckily, the Metamorphosis Project planning board was able to find land in Cooper Young. This new spot is much better for the shelter as it is closer to OUTMemphis and in perhaps the most progressive and LGBTQ-friendly area of Memphis. To create the shelter, shipping containers will be brought in and converted into housing units, with each unit housing one tenant each. The project will initially house 4 youths and expand as funding permits. Youths will be allowed to stay in the shelter for

up to 30 days. Currently, there is no date that the Metamorphosis Project is set to open as the project is still lacking roughly \$200,000 dollars that are needed to make it operational.⁶⁷

So far, funding for the Metamorphosis Project has come in the form of private donations and grants. Stephanie Reyes and other members of the committee have requested several grants from local organizations and hope to receive them in the coming months and begin construction as soon as possible. If these funding sources do not end up granting the program the funds that it needs, the committee may seek public funding from the city of Memphis, however there is no guarantee that such funding will be granted as the city government seems unwilling to financially support homeless shelters so far. This, combined with the continued lack of local support and the new HUD turn away from directly addressing LGBTQ issues, means that LGBTQ youths still lack a safe and secure shelter in the city and are at risk as a result.⁶⁸

The third portion of the Metamorphosis Project is the rapid re-housing program. While the other two parts of the project are funded entirely by private donations and foundations, the rapid re-housing program is funded through HUD's CoC grant program. The rapid re-housing program provides shelter for ten 18 to 24 year old LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness in Memphis. Though the funding was approved in February 2017, the program has yet to begin due to complications with accessing the funding. While OUTMemphis is seeking solutions and planning for them in the future, there is little that exists right now for the LGBTQ youth homeless population due to funding constraints.⁶⁹

While the Metamorphosis Project is a terrific start toward ending the issue, the problems that these youths face are at a societal level. Religious organizations need to change their rhetoric from hate and fear to acceptance and love. Health care providers need to gain the knowledge on LGBTQ specific issues and terminology. Governments need to stop ignoring the population.

Employers need to stop discrimination on the basis of sexuality and gender identity. Homeless shelters need to follow suit. Most importantly, parents and families need to change, because no homeless shelter, no rehousing program, no job training program and no mental health professional can right the wrongs of being discriminated against and forced from one's own home. Though the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness may never end, the work of activists and nonprofit organizations like OUTMemphis are the next steps in LGBTQ justice.

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