

Q&A



KEVIN M. CATHCART AND DR. ELIZABETH CLARK, PRESIDENT

A Wider Safety Net

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth are in America's child welfare and juvenile justice systems in disproportionate numbers. Executive Director Kevin Cathcart and Dr. Elizabeth Clark, President of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Foundation, discuss the ongoing work of better understanding, addressing and protecting LGBTQ young people in the social service system.

KEVIN M. CATHCART: We should recognize that a significant number of young people in out-of-home care are in a much better place than they would have been a few years ago because of better policies and training. In March, for instance, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services implemented the most comprehensive LGBTQ juvenile justice policy in the country. And California has a law on the books protecting LGBTQ youth statewide. But there's still a long way to go until this help reaches everyone that needs it. When we talk about the needs and challenges that LGBTQ youth face

in out-of-home care, it's important to remember that many are there for reasons connected with their sexual orientation or their gender identity — which cause them to bounce out of schools, to be kicked out of their families and to end up in the social service system. Their sexual orientation or gender identity has already affected their lives in big ways. Remember how little control young people have over the settings in which they live. In out-of-home care, especially in the foster care system, there is the additional fear or trauma that comes with being bounced around from home to home — switching schools, friends, neighborhoods. There just isn't enough permanency.

ELIZABETH CLARK: We see this as a major civil rights issue. As a membership association of about 150,000 social workers, the NASW Foundation's goal is to help develop and respond to social work policy and practice issues. We found that our members working in areas with LGBTQ youth felt that they were working in isolation, and that they didn't feel they had enough input from the national association. LGBTQ youth in out-of-home care have so many needs to address. Youth living on the streets, living in an institution or living with foster families can have serious problems — health problems, safety issues. Whether related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, youth often don't have the support they need from families, schools or institutions.

KC: One of the big challenges is the squeamishness that our society has about young people and sex, which is heightened when we talk about same-sex sexual activity. Many times foster parents or caregivers are extremely nervous about addressing sexuality because they worry about their jobs. They worry about what happens when it's publicly acknowledged that kids under their care are not just sexually active but are sexually active with same-sex partners. It may be risky to be seen as encouraging sexual behavior of any sort. But when adults are overly cautious or avoid certain topics, young people usually pick up on it and get the message that something is wrong with them.

EC: Kids are smart in many ways. They're very able to identify whom they can talk to: whom they trust and don't trust. I think it would be particularly hard to talk about your own sexuality if you were in foster care, because you're trying to fit into a family. I think, too, it's important to address how the media portrays some of these issues. I think media sources often try to be positive by devoting air time to LGBT issues, but it often ends up having negative effects. Every teenager has to deal with issues of sexuality, becoming comfortable with their own identity, with their own behavior, their own needs. But the media — television shows, news coverage — sometimes play this up for LGBTQ adolescents in a way where stereotypes are perpetuated. The media has the potential

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to be a key modeler of more accepting environments and provisions for young people who need more assurances of their safety. Statistics show very high numbers of young children or adolescents who have suffered either physical or verbal abuse in high school. Nearly two-thirds of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed on the basis of sexual orientation and more than a quarter because of their gender expression. Every time there is an act of violence against a young person, it becomes a huge media event, but so little positive impact comes from it.

KC: And we’ve barely begun to address the invisibility of the population aging out of the foster care system. No one expects people at the age of 18 to suddenly be fully-functioning. But, generally, we have this harsh cut-off date for youth in out-of-home care systems who usually don’t have any support systems to fall back on. It’s no surprise that they struggle with the transition. And consider the effects of our economy now — not only in terms of state funding for transitional programs or other support services, but what about landing jobs?

EC: We worry about that too because we know that we already have a shortage of social workers in this country. We often refer to social workers as being “society’s safety net.” But I worry most of all about the cutbacks in federal funding for programs. If we’re cutting back so that we can’t afford Medicare services, how are we going to afford

youth services? We hope that in the next several years we will see better programs and services that will include research funded by the federal and state governments. We hope that there will be more exposure on and about the LGBTQ population through public education in the media. We’d like to see some better media partnership on these areas. And we’d love to see more services available for their use, particularly in urban areas.

KC: We must continue the work that we’ve done on behalf of adults who work in this field, because far too many people still remain closeted, and then youth lack role models who aren’t helping to steer the conversation in the direction it needs to go — whether among policymakers or between adults who are working in the field. When LGBT providers working in these settings don’t feel that they can come out, LGBTQ youth continue to believe that there is nobody there who will understand. It has to be safe for adults to be working in the field in order for it to be safe for young people to be living in these programs. Our work in protecting employment rights for adults or protecting the rights of gay people to be parents actually resonates in a big way for young people in the system.

EC: I think a lot of the work that’s being done for same-sex parents is also very important. We’ve done quite a bit of work here on same-sex marriage and adoption in the friend-of-the-court briefs we’ve worked on,

including the New Jersey marriage case that Lambda Legal litigated. The NASW Legal Defense Fund has been around for a long time, and the NASW Foundation has been involved in a number of programs supporting gay youth and LGBT parents over the years. And our group is committed to our continuing partnership, particularly in the upcoming train-the-trainer initiative, where we will work together to provide comprehensive training to over 1000 social workers on LGBTQ youth concerns.

KC: And that, from our perspective, is a wonderful thing. Because what we bring to any partnership that we go into is a tremendous range of experience with the LGBT community and with people who have been facing discrimination in the legal system. But we don’t have the connections with large numbers of social workers out there. NASW is a leader in the field, and was out there with us in the days where there was still huge debate over whether gay people should be foster parents. Gay foster children were still incredibly invisible — and still are in many places — but we’ve done a lot of work fighting to bring out the full picture of who youth in out-of-home care actually are. And so we continue to rely on these partnerships, which bring our expertise to all of the people who could use it, learn from it and benefit from it. It’s essential to extending our reach to youth in out-of-home care and to their caregivers. **L**