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Health Care for All

by Heather Boerner

Planned Parenthood has strived to be at the forefront of health care for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ). In 2005, the most recent date for which statistics were available, Planned Parenthood affiliates performed 2,500 hours of training on appropriate and sensitive care for LGBTQ clients.

plannedparenthood.org looks at some local affiliates who are reaching out to the LGBTQ community in new and innovative ways.

In Iowa

Long before recent research showed that men can develop anal dysplasia — abnormal cell growth — and cancer from the human papilloma virus (HPV), Dr. Joe Freund was performing anal Pap tests on his gay clients at Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa (PPGI). The openly gay doctor, who speaks at local medical schools on proper intake and protocols for LGBTQ patients, has clients who “literally travel from all over the state and even from neighboring states” to be treated by him, says Penny Dickey, PPGI vice president of health services and education.

Many of those clients are transgender and transsexual, says Dickey. Freund prescribes hormones to help in gender reassignment, and he wrote a protocol for treating transgender clients. PPGI is also working with the Iowa Department of Health to reach out to the lesbian community to encourage regular mammograms, since research shows that lesbians are less likely than their heterosexual peers to get routine breast and cervical cancer screenings.

“The gay population here isn’t large,” says Dickey. “But ... they’re underserved. I would say, when you look at the general health system, it’s very likely that we are the sole outreach organizer to the LGBT community. And we take it very seriously. We have a focus on providing general care to the LGBT population, to be a welcoming, and not a segregating, environment.” To help create that environment, PPGI posts LGBTQ-friendly materials and information throughout its health centers. “Our general rule is that we address clients as they wish to be addressed, and in caring for clients we treat the body parts we find. If someone presents as male but has a cervix, we do a Pap [test]. If someone presents as female but has a prostate, we do a prostate test..”

In New York

Health educator Maureen Kelly has an inclusive approach to health care access. She’s already helped create a health care environment that’s friendly to plus-size women — providing larger robes, roomier waiting room chairs, and information for plus-size women. Now, she’s turned her focus on making the health care centers of Planned

Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes (PPSFL) transgender-friendly.

Recently, she produced a manual for health care providers serving the transgender community. The manual outlines the organization's philosophy: "Understanding, teaching about, and promoting healthy sexuality is at the core of our work, passion, and commitment as members of the Planned Parenthood community. We believe that sexuality is a lifelong aspect of being human to be celebrated with respect, openness, and mutuality."

Some key tips include updating forms to include a line for preferred name, to respect the fact that some trans clients may have a legal name as well as a preferred name that reflects their gender identity; advising health care providers to ask how a patient wants to talk about his or her body, since some trans clients may not be comfortable using anatomical or medical terms; and urging health care providers to educate themselves about the medical needs and identities of trans people, which may include learning how medications may interact with hormones clients may be talking to assist their transition from one gender to another. PPSFL also participates in a global partner program, in which they work with a family planning clinic elsewhere in the world. On a recent trip to visit their sister clinic in Namibia, spokesperson Sara Palmer said PPSFL representatives reached out to the Rainbow Project, an LGBTQ organization in that country, to find out how they can better serve LGBTQ clients in Namibia.

In Oklahoma

The negative health effects of being a stigmatized minority have been well documented: the LGBTQ community has higher rates of depression, anxiety, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and sexually transmitted infections, and, particularly among LGBTQ youth, a higher rate of suicide. As a gay man in Tulsa, OK, who has lived with HIV for 21 years, Tommy Chesbro wanted to make sure that health care organizations in the region knew about these negative health effects and how best to combat them. Chesbro is vice president of education for Planned Parenthood of Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma (PPAEO).

For more than two years, PPAEO has worked with local, state, and federal health agencies to sensitize them to the physical and mental health effects that stigmatization has on the LGBTQ community. It also sponsors a support group for Native-American two-spirited people — its LGBTQ community. The goal, he said, is to reach out to everyone, and ensure quality care for everyone.

"Just like with any disenfranchised group, the LGBT community faces health disparities," says Chesbro. "And we would really like to decrease the stigma that makes it hard for LGBTQ people to get care."

Across the Country

LGBTQ-sensitive services are not limited to Iowa, New York, or Oklahoma. Across the country, Planned Parenthood health centers are breaking down barriers to health care, collaborating with like-minded organizations to reach out to the LGBTQ community, and working to ensure high-quality health care for all.

Call 1-800-230-PLAN to be connected to the Planned Parenthood health center nearest you.

Heather Boerner is a freelance sexual health writer in San Francisco.

Published: 07.06.07

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