Regional Listening Forums: An Examination of the Methodologies Used by the Child Welfare League of America and Lambda Legal to Highlight the Experiences of LGBTQ Youth in Care

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In 2002, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund began Fostering Transitions: CWLA/Lambda Joint Initiative to Support LGBTQ Youth and Adults Involved with the Child Welfare System. To document the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, as well as identify strategies for systems improvement, initiative staff associated with the joint initiative conducted a series of Regional Listening Forums in 13 cities in the United States. More than 500 participants attended the forums, representing 22 states from every region in the country. Participants included former and current youth in care as well as the adults who work most closely with them. This article focuses on the methodologies on which the forums were developed and conducted.
I realized that being gay is not my problem. It's *their* problem. I see it as a social disease. I try not to get involved in negative communities. But I do try to teach them. I'd rather teach them than ignore them. Otherwise, the ignorance will continue and nothing will ever be done about it.

A young person currently in the care of the child welfare system made this statement during an event called a Regional Listening Forum, organized by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. The objective of this event, held in 13 different cities around the country between September 2003 and December 2004, was to highlight the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in care. The forums were intended to provide an opportunity for them and the adults who care for them to share their experiences and work together to identify creative strategies for bringing about lasting change within the child welfare system.

More than 500 youth and adult participants from 22 states attended, offering personal stories of actual experiences, and concrete solutions for building the capacity of the child welfare system to better meet the needs of LGBTQ young people in care. In summer 2006, CWLA will publish a report summarizing the stories and recommendations gathered during the listening forums, which will serve as a tool for learning more about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in care and strategies for better meeting their needs (see www.cwla.org). This article will focus on the methodologies used to develop and conduct the Regional Listening Forums.

For the purposes of this article, “youth in care” is defined as any child or young person who is the custody of a state department of child welfare or juvenile justice services or their agents. The services they receive may be delivered through family foster care, congregate care, independent or transitional living programs, or any combination thereof. The age span of these youth reflects
their ages while in care. The age at which a youth in care “ages out”—when one is deemed to be a self-sustaining adult individual no longer eligible for public child welfare assistance and support—varies from state to state. Therefore, a youth’s eligibility for care, rather than chronological age, is used in this article to determine a participant’s status as a “youth.”

Background

In 2001, Lambda Legal published the report *Youth in the Margins: A Report on the Unmet Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Adolescents in Foster Care* (see www.lambdalegal.org/cgi-bin/iowa/news/publications.html?record=899). This 175-page report highlights the results of a survey completed voluntarily by child welfare administrators in 14 in every region of the United States. The survey focuses on four primary areas: nondiscrimination policies, foster parent and staff training, and knowledge and existence of programs and services for LGBTQ youth. For each state, Lambda Legal, joined by a coalition of youth advocates, offered specific recommendations and concrete proposals for reform to better meet the needs of these youth. At the time *Youth in the Margins* was released, no state reported having a comprehensive strategy for supporting the LGBTQ youth in their care and for protecting them from discrimination and mistreatment.

**CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative**

To fundamentally change the way LGBTQ youth are treated in the nation’s foster care system and build the capacity of the child welfare system to support these youth, CWLA and Lambda Legal combined their respective expertise in child welfare and LGBTQ civil rights to launch an historic partnership: Fostering Transitions: CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative to Support LGBTQ Youth and Adults Involved with the Child Welfare System. Based in Washington, D.C., with regional offices in six
cities, CWLA is the nation’s oldest and largest membership-based association of child welfare organizations. With a membership base of nearly 1,000 private and public child welfare agencies, including nearly every state’s department of child welfare services, CWLA and its members attend to the needs of more than 3.5 million abused and neglected children and their families each year with a wide range of services. Lambda Legal is the country’s oldest and largest advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the civil rights of LGBTQ people and people with HIV. Based in New York City, Lambda also has regional offices in four other cities.

Together, CWLA and Lambda are working with partner organizations across the country for one primary goal: to increase the capacity of the nation’s child welfare system to more competently and compassionately meet the needs of LGBTQ youth in care. The objectives of this joint initiative, which began in 2002, are met through a variety of approaches and made operational through several components.

**LGBTQ Program Director and Foster Care Attorney**

For the first time in its 85-year history, CWLA hired a full-time LGBTQ Program Director to coordinate its efforts to improve systems of care for LGBTQ youth. Lambda Legal’s full-time Foster Care Attorney serves as the organization’s primary representative on the joint initiative. Both are coauthors of this article.

**National LGBTQ Advisory Network**

The National LGBTQ Advisory Network was convened to provide ongoing support to the joint initiative. The network is comprised of nearly 90 child welfare professionals and more than a dozen young LGBT people who guide and inform the joint initiative staff in the development of programmatic strategies, materials, and resources. All youth members of the advisory network are current or former foster youth. Advisory network members also help disseminate information throughout their communities and regions.
Conferences

Since the beginning of the joint initiative, CWLA and Lambda Legal staff have conducted more than 50 workshops and presentations at national and regional conferences throughout the country. Presentations on the CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative also have been integrated in all CWLA-sponsored conferences, including the annual national conference held in Washington, DC, regional conferences, and issue-specific conferences, such as the adoption and best-practices conferences.

In addition, for the first time in its history, CWLA held a preconference institute dedicated entirely to LGBTQ issues before its 2005 national conference. This day-long institute brought together approximately 75 experts on LGBTQ youth, as well as numerous young LGBTQ people, from all around the country for an exploration of the needs of LGBTQ youth in care as well as those strategies that have been developed to best serve them. Based on the success of that event, CWLA will dedicate its entire annual, three-day best practices conference, Finding Better Ways, in November 2006 to the subject of working with LGBTQ youth in care. This conference, convening in Nashville, Tennessee, will be the first national conference dedicated entirely to issues affecting LGBTQ youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Publications

Joint initiative staff have written articles on meeting the needs of LGBTQ youth in care that have been published in several national journals and newsletters. In addition, articles about the CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative have appeared in numerous newspapers, newsletters, and magazines throughout the country, including the Chicago Tribune, the Detroit News, Common Ground, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children. Most important, CWLA has dedicated this special edition of its Child Welfare Journal exclusively to LGBTQ issues.
LGBTQ Tool Kit

To provide practical resources to the child welfare field in serving LGBTQ youth, the joint initiative is developing a tool kit that will contain information and resources, including tips and information for LGBTQ young people in care; basic facts about LGBTQ people, professional standards, and best practice principles that apply; how to advocate for better policies, training, and services at public and private child welfare agencies; clinical issues affecting LGBTQ youth; tips and guidelines for caseworkers, foster parents, and congregate care providers; and cultural contexts that bear on LGBTQ issues (e.g., race and ethnicity).

Public Policy Advocacy

The joint initiative staff has provided technical assistance to child welfare officials in a number of locales working toward developing competency in caring for LGBTQ youth in care. CWLA and Lambda Legal have worked on policies, training initiatives, local task forces, and even legislative matters—both in support and opposition of bills—in states around the country. In 2005, CWLA released a formal public policy statement in support of parenting by LGBT individuals and couples.

Regional Listening Forums

Rationale

A key feature of the CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative is the series of Regional Listening Forums hosted in 13 cities around the country. But why conduct Regional Listening Forums? With their combined histories, expertise, and influence, CWLA and Lambda Legal simply could have relied on existing research and literature and issued a series of recommendations to the child welfare field for improving systems of care for LGBTQ youth. Previous publications by both CWLA and Lambda Legal, including Lambda Legal's

Both organizations, however, recognize that LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system have largely remained invisible and marginalized with their voices often going unheard. Indeed, an administrator of one of the state child welfare agencies interviewed for Lambda Legal’s Youth in the Margins report said simply, “there are no [LGBTQ] youth in the state’s foster care system” (Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2001). To fundamentally change the way the system has treated these youth, CWLA and Lambda Legal decided that a new approach was needed. Their joint initiative sought to hear first hand from LGBTQ youth themselves about their experiences in the child welfare system and to work together with child welfare professionals on finding solutions to the gaps and obstacles to providing more competent care. By taking this approach, more meaningful and lasting change might occur.

The child welfare system generally has not been a safe and supportive place for LGBTQ youth. As a result, many have learned to hide, exploiting their invisibility to survive life in care, while others, unable to hide, turn to the streets in search of more safety than was provided by the system. Unlike other demographic characteristics such as race, age, or in most cases, sex, LGBTQ youth are not readily seen or recognized by child welfare professionals ill-equipped to engender the trust necessary for a young person to disclose his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ youth in care experience the same vulnerabilities as other youth, but they have additional layers of vulnerability that necessitate examination in order to better address their needs.

The vulnerability of LGBTQ youth in care often is compounded by the high levels of abuse and rejection they often experience in their families, among their peers, in their schools, and in their communities. This abuse can have profound consequences
to their mental and physical health. For example, a study of high
school students in Massachusetts found that gay, lesbian, and
bisexual students were three times more likely to report having
been threatened or injured with a weapon at school (23.5% of
sexual minority students versus 7.8% of others), and that they
were more than five times more likely to have attempted suicide
(40.4% of sexual minority students versus 7.2% of others)
(Goodenow, 2003).

LGBTQ youth often experience violent abuse based on their
sexual orientation or gender identity at the hands of members of
their family of origin. Fifty percent of gay males report negative
reactions from their parents when they disclosed their sexual ori-
entation (Remafedi, 1987); 26% were forced to leave home as a
result of disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents (U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services, 1989); and 33% of
gay men and 34% of lesbians report suffering physical violence
from family members as a result of their sexual orientation, (Gross,
Aurand, & Addessa, 2000).

Many young people have reported incidents of violent abuse,
rape, and harassment while in foster and group homes, caused
by their sexual orientation or gender identity. A young man who
participated in a Regional Listening Forum offered this example:
"I got jumped by a bunch of guys in my group home, and when
I told the director, he said, 'Well, if you weren't a faggot they
wouldn't beat you up.' It's not fair."

With few exceptions (Desetta & Hefner, 2000; Mallon, 1998),
LGBTQ youth have had little opportunity to openly share their
stories and become involved in helping create a more caring and
competent system of care, until the CWLA/Lambda Legal Re-
gional Listening Forums. The purpose of the forums was to cre-
ate a safe environment for LGBTQ youth and adults living or
working within the child welfare system to share their experi-
ences, ideas, and as a group, come up with strategies for creating
a more competent system of care for LGBTQ youth. Participants
heard powerful accounts of real-life experiences and challenges directly from those who have lived them, and engaged in considering the points of resistance to creating an LGBTQ-supportive environment and solutions for overcoming obstacles.

Discussion during the forums focused on three primary areas:
1. Existing resources for LGBTQ youth,
2. Unmet needs of LGBTQ youth in care, and

Methodology

Planning the Forums

The first task was to select the cities where forums would be held. In making the selection, CWLA and Lambda Legal took into consideration issues such as geographic and ethnic/racial diversity, as well as the likelihood that participants could be recruited from both the public and private youth-serving organizations in the area. A high priority was placed on holding forums in as many geographically diverse regions as possible. As a result, forums were held in Hartford, Connecticut; Tucson, Arizona; New York City; Bloomington, Indiana; Sacramento and San Diego, California; Augusta, Maine; Jacksonville and Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Denver, Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Once a particular city was decided upon, a local host planning committee was established. At least one representative from the CWLA/Lambda Legal National LGBTQ Advisory Network participated on each host committee. Some forums were developed with support from large planning committees comprised of representatives from several local service providers. Others were planned by a small group of individuals committed to improving the local system of care for LGBTQ youth.
Each local planning committee was provided with a “to-do” list to help guide the planning process. Tasks to be accomplished by the forum host included selecting the location for the forum, reserving the meeting space, compiling an invitation list to be sent to CWLA for distribution, securing equipment, conducting follow-up calls, and meetings with key prospective participants. The forums intentionally were designed to be easily planned.

CWLA and Lambda Legal staff developed several documents to support recruitment of adults and youth to the forum. These documents included an invitation letter for adults, a separate invitation for youth containing more youth-friendly language, and colorful flyers containing information about the forum for display throughout the target area.

CWLA and Lambda Legal relied heavily on the local planning committees for two primary functions: to secure a meeting space and, most important, to draw on their relationships with those in the community whom they identified as likely and important participants. Forums were not open, town-hall style events. Rather, participants were strategically invited based on the function they serve within the system. Invitation lists typically contained a wide cross-section of targeted participants, including state child welfare administrators and policymakers; CEOs of local nonprofit service providers; clinical, direct care, and administrative staff of residential treatment and group home programs; representatives from the juvenile justice system; judges, lawyers, guardians ad litem, and other advocates; school administrators, teachers and counselors; foster parents and families of youth in care; caseworkers; child welfare advocates; and, most important, LGBTQ youth themselves.

Once the host and planners compiled a list of invitees, it was forwarded to CWLA. To intentionally express CWLA’s commitment to improving systems of care for LGBTQ youth and encourage member agencies to participate, invitation packets were mailed out within CWLA envelopes. Each packet contained a copy of the adult invitation letter and flyer as well as an outline of the forum,
which included a brief overview of the CWLA / Lambda Legal joint initiative and all of the questions that would be discussed during the forum. The packets also contained copies of the youth invitation letter and flyer, along with a request to pass on the information to any young people who may be interested in attending the forum and whose contributions would benefit the process.

After the invitation packets were mailed out, the local host or planners provided follow-up contact to maximize participation by key invitees. This strategy proved to be very effective, and the goal of attracting 20–40 participants for each forum was met easily. Strong relationships between adults and youth proved to be the most important factor in ensuring youth participation.

Strategies for recruiting youth participants varied depending on a number of variables, including existing services and resources, knowledge and understanding on the part of local host and planners as to where to locate LGBTQ youth, and levels of trust between LGBTQ youth and local service providers. Because of the preponderance of existing services and programs for LGBTQ youth in New York City, a separate forum attended by youth only was held in addition to the adult forum. The forum attended by the largest number of LGBTQ youth, however, was in Jacksonville, due in large part to the Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network’s (JASMYN) ongoing and sustained relationships with several local LGBTQ youth. In Minneapolis, the local host and planners made the decision to hold the forum at an Episcopal church on a Monday afternoon, because that church sponsors a dinner each Monday evening for homeless youth, many who identify as LGBTQ. The forum in Denver was held at the LGBTQ community center, a component of which is Rainbow Alley, which provides a wide range of services for LGBTQ youth. Strong relationships between adults and youth proved to be effective in ensuring youth participation in each of the cities in which a forum was held.

Listening forums were held in a variety of settings. Two were held in local LGBT community centers, one at a private nonprofit
community-based service organization, five in state or city offices, three in churches, and two in conjunction with one regional and one national conference.

The distinct political and cultural climate of each city was a factor in planning each forum. For example, in Jacksonville, where the political climate is conservative, the planners had difficulty locating an agency willing to host the forum. One local child welfare service provider, who is supportive of competent services for LGBTQ youth but feared a backlash if it openly supported and hosted the forum, offered to pay for a neutral meeting space in a hotel. In the end, a local Unitarian Universalist church hosted the listening forum.

The planning process was very different in San Diego, where many services for LGBTQ youth exist, as well as state laws and policies that protect LGBT youth and adults involved with the child welfare system. The planning committee in that city was comprised of several organizations, representatives, each of whom volunteered his or her organizations' name and logo to be included on every invitation and flyer for the event. The forum was held in the city's large LGBT community center.

The authors do not mean to infer that a city such as San Diego is necessarily better equipped to address the needs of LGBTQ youth than Jacksonville. As previously stated, more youth attended the forum in Jacksonville than in any other city. Each city has its own distinct successes and challenges in developing competent systems of care for LGBTQ youth. Rather, the contexts of these cities provide information about efforts to support LGBTQ youth in care by those who live and work in them. The political, social, religious, and economic environments of the cities in which forums were held played a significant role throughout the whole of the planning process. A large part of what makes the Regional Listening Forums unique is their large geographic scope, and therefore, the variety of perspectives of the participants. These environments, in and of themselves, provide valuable information.
Conducting the Forums

The ideal set-up for a forum consisted of one large room where the entire group, typically comprised of 25–50 adults and young people, could meet, with two breakout rooms in which smaller group discussions could take place. A few of the forums, however, were held entirely in one large room, with the small-group discussions at opposite ends. Each meeting room was set up as a circle of chairs to maximize discussion and relationship-building among participants. Several materials were placed on each chair, including an agenda with all of the questions that would be discussed, a copy of Lambda Legal’s Youth in the Margins report, an overview of the CWLA/Lambda Legal joint initiative, and any other resources compiled by the local planning committee to provide information and support for LGBTQ youth. The only equipment needed was two flip charts and markers. Each forum lasted from 3 to 4 hours and was facilitated by CWLA and Lambda Legal staff.

As participants entered the meeting space, each was asked to sign in. Each participant then was asked to read and sign a consent or assent form (depending on their age), articulating that they were participating in the forum willingly and of their own volition. The consent/assent forms noted that the large group sessions would be recorded for the purposes of notetaking in preparation of the subsequent report of the forums, but that no identifying information would be used. The consent/assent forms were reviewed and approved by CWLA’s Institutional Review Board.

Each forum began with a welcome and introduction of the CWLA and Lambda Legal staff, who offered a brief overview of the joint initiative and the role the forums play. Each participant then was invited to introduce him or herself and to share one reason why they were participating. Following the overview and introductions, participants were encouraged to stay in contact with one another and form a local committee, task force, or coalition to work on implementing the ideas that would be generated
during the forum. A separate sign-in sheet was distributed for those who wished to be a part of a local task force.

The first portion of the forum was a large group discussion examining the existing resources, services, and programs for LGBTQ youth within the host community. This brainstorming process typically yielded a long list of local resources, including community centers; supportive child welfare agencies; safe residential programs; individuals such as judges, probation officers, or teachers who were known to support LGBTQ youth, foster families, or placement agencies and workers; LGBTQ-competent mental and medical health services; services for transgender youth; and supportive faith communities. Often, many participants learned of community resources and allies for the first time during this portion of the discussion.

The group then split into two breakout groups for more in-depth discussions. One breakout group focused on the unmet needs of LGBTQ youth in care, while the other discussed specific strategies and ideas for better meeting the needs of LGBTQ youth in care. A total of 22 questions were posed to the participants in both groups to guide the discussion and frame the exploration of the issues. For example, participants in the group focusing on unmet needs were asked questions such as, “What are the most pressing needs of LGBTQ young people in foster care?” and “What are the main barriers to supportive services for LGBTQ young people?” Participants in the group discussing strategies and ideas for the future were asked questions such as, “What are the most important steps to improve foster care for LGBTQ young people?” and “What individuals and/or organizations need to become more involved to help LGBTQ young people in foster care?”

The small group discussions provided a safe and supportive environment for participants, particularly the youth, to openly discuss their personal experiences within the child welfare system. That these discussions occurred in the second and third hours of the forum was a factor of their initial design. By then, a certain amount of trust had been established among participants and
CWLA/Lambda Legal staff. This trust allowed for a degree of candor that might not have occurred had participants been asked the same questions at the start of the forum. The facilitators recorded the participants’ responses to the questions during these breakout group discussions on large flip charts using magic markers.

The group then was given a short break, during which snacks were served. This allowed participants to network with each other and speak informally among one another.

The large group then reconvened for a brief wrap-up. Rather than a full report of everything that was discussed during the small breakout groups, participants were asked to identify three or four primary themes that emerged from their discussion. These themes then were reported to the larger group and discussed. In almost all cases, a youth participant volunteered to be the reporter of their breakout group’s discussion. The primary themes that emerged from the forums fell into the following three categories:

1. The need for comprehensive policies that support open and competent support for LGBTQ youth in care.
2. The need for comprehensive training throughout all levels of the child welfare system to build capacity for serving LGBTQ youth in care.
3. The development of services that are designed with the specific needs of LGBTQ youth in mind.

Before participants left, they were asked to complete an evaluation form containing a series of nine statements intended to capture their level of satisfaction with the forum. Responses were categorized by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Well over 90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, “The forum covered issues of concern to me,” “The forum atmosphere was comfortable for listening and sharing,” and “The forum helped me to better understand issues affecting LGBTQ youth.”

Participants also could provide qualitative responses. Responses offered by participants to the question, “What did you like most about the listening forum?” yielded statements such
as, "safety for people to speak," "the mix of the people that attended," "hearing what others had to say," and "made great connections and got great ideas." Responses offered by participants to the question, "What could be done to improve the listening forum?" resulted in comments such as, "wanted more time," "longer Q&A time," "this should be done for all youth groups," and "less questions so we're not rushing through." Overall, participants overwhelmingly were satisfied with having an opportunity to share their experiences and express their ideas and strategies for improving systems of care for LGBTQ youth.

Discussion

The goal going into the forums was not to emerge with documentation that mirrored the thematic areas of Lambda Legal's Youth in the Margins (policies, training, and services). The themes contained in Lambda Legal's report, however, reverberated throughout all of the listening forums. What was true when report was published in 2001 was still true when the forums were conducted in 2003 and 2004. The child welfare field is still in need of supportive policies, comprehensive training, and services for LGBTQ youth.

With the exception of certain specific topics, such as the role that faith-based organizations play on levels of support for LGBTQ youth in care or the specific experiences of transgender youth, the questions posed to participants during the forums were designed to be broad in scope in an effort to illicit responses that most reflected issues of greatest priority according to those who participated. Therefore, the authors did not know which issues would emerge as those the participants believed to present the greatest challenges to LGBTQ youth in care or which steps for the future might lead to the most positive alterations within the system. Although the thematic areas that emerged from all of the forums fell into the three primary areas of policy, training, and services, sev-
eral subissues emerged from among these three primary thematic areas as the responses were examined in detail from all of the forums. The subissues that arose during the forums, as prioritized by participants, fell into the following categories: anti-LGBTQ attitudes and their effects on the treatment LGBTQ youth in care receive, safety, homelessness, schools, family and permanence, transgender youth issues, faith-based and religious issues, issues faced by youth in rural areas, and adults who work in child welfare.

These issues are examined as separate chapters in the comprehensive report of the forums. Each chapter begins with an exploration of the issue, grounded in existing substantiating research. The remainder of the chapter is an examination of the unmet needs of LGBTQ youth and steps the child welfare system can take to improve its support, as articulated by the forum participants. These future steps contain specific recommendations for child welfare policymakers and practitioners, as well as as-yet unanswered questions, which will form the basis for future sociological research. Each chapter is framed around numerous quotations from the forum participants that underscore the issues of greatest priority to them. Their voices provide the primary justification for conducting these forums. Hundreds of quotations were captured during the forums. The following is but a small sample of the sentiments expressed by LGBTQ youth in care who participated in Regional Listening Forums, highlighting the treatment they have received:

- “When I was in foster care, all my foster mom would do is taunt me.”
- “When I was 15, I was walking down the street with my best friend and a group of guys came up to us and asked my friend if he was gay. He said yes, and they killed him right in front of me. I ran home to tell my parents what happened, and they kicked me out. I live in a shelter now. My parents don’t love me because I’m gay.”
- “In my high school, when I came out, I didn’t know who to go to, so I searched online. They had every site blocked
that had the words 'gay,' 'lesbian,' or 'transgender,' etc. I could go to thousands of sites about how to kill myself, but I couldn't find one site to explain who I could go to for getting help.

- "Right away, a child has a personality. And if you suppress that children's sexual orientation or gender identity, children are going to have major emotional problems that they're never going to get rid of."

- "I was placed in a coed group home, and when I was shown to my room, I asked why I was being put on the boys' floor. They said, 'You're not a boy? Well, we can't put you on the girls' floor looking like that.' So they made me sleep on a couch on a landing in between the two floors. The metaphor was not lost on me."

- "12.5% of my foster families treated me like a human being, the rest treated me really badly."

- "I was in the system since I was 8. I've been in lots of different places. And for the most part, they were pretty poor. Social workers' attitudes were terrible. Social workers making fun of other social workers who were supporting gay youth, saying, 'Oh, you must be gay too. Do you have a lot of gay kids in your case load?' I had a pretty good experience at [the LGBTQ group home]. It was a good program."

- "My main concern with the social service system is the lack of understanding of transgender issues. As a woman of transgender experience, my experiences and needs are different from gay and lesbian youth. Some of these needs include hormone replacement therapy."

Following each forum, CWLA and Lambda Legal staff transcribed the notes from all of the flip charts and generated a written report summarizing the discussions. This report then was sent back to the local host and planners and any newly formed or reconvened local LGBTQ task force to use as a blueprint for change in their specific area. Local LGBTQ committees, task forces, or
coalitions have emerged in nearly every city in which a forum was held. For example, a statewide coalition known as the Rocky Mountain Equal Care Coalition grew out of the forum held in Denver. In New York City, the Administration for Children’s Services (ASC) reconvened its LGBTQ task force, which had previously disbanded.

**Conclusion**

CWLA and Lambda Legal never intended to simply issue another set of their recommendations to the child welfare field on steps they believe are needed to ensure the safety, health, and well-being of LGBTQ youth. Rather, the ideas and strategies profiled in the final report are those identified by the hundreds of individuals from across the country who came together at the Regional Listening Forums to offer their experiences, insight, and ideas for creating a child welfare system that is more compassionate and competent in its care of LGBTQ youth. In addition to the ideas of the participants from the 13 states in which the forums were held, participants attended from a number of other states, including Georgia, Wyoming, Washington, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Hawaii, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Texas. Therefore, the original goal of soliciting perspectives of those who live and work within a wide range of geographical areas was achieved.

The participants in the Regional Listening Forums provide compelling, first-hand accounts and practical information about the child welfare system and its treatment of LGBTQ youth. Much has improved during the past several years, but clearly, much remains to be done before LGBTQ youth are made to feel safe, affirmed, and respected by the systems charged with their care.

Child welfare practitioners are encouraged to conduct Regional Listening Forums in their communities to highlight the experiences of LGBTQ youth in their communities and develop
local strategies for improving the care they receive. In addition to
the print version of the listening forums' comprehensive report,
an Internet version also will be available at the websites of CWLA
and Lambda Legal. Information gathered during any future fo-
rums can be added to the online version.

For more information about the Regional Listening Forums,
including how to access the comprehensive report, or to learn
more about conducting a forum, visit the LGBTQ link at the

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