WELCOMING, AFFIRMING, SUPPORTING:

Child Welfare Systems Must Honor the WHOLE Child

Recommendations from the getREAL Initiative

by Kristen Weber and Bill Bettencourt

About getREAL

The getREAL (Recognize. Engage. Affirm. Love.) project works with child welfare agencies to ensure that attention is paid to planning for the healthy sexual and identity development of all children and youth. Along with race, ethnicity, and disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) is part of the identity formation that occurs in adolescence. getREAL works to ensure that all young people feel valued and affirmed to embrace their authentic selves in all aspects of their identity including SOGIE. To learn more, please visit us at: CSSP.org/our-work/project/getREAL/.

About CSSP

CSSP is a national, non-profit policy organization that connects community action, public system reform, and policy change. We work to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. To do this, we translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, support strong and inclusive communities, and advocate with and for all children and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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"**Love is not available to those of us deemed disposable and unlovable.**

Lovelessness is a consequence of living in a queer-hating society. It shapes relationships between Black men who love men, just as it shapes our relationship to the communities we exist in.

We've been denied love.

But like cunning magicians, many of us have learned to break ourselves out of our cages even when those attempting to master our lives keep fervent hold of the keys."

No Ashes in the Fire
by Darnell Moore

All children and youth belong to families and communities and deserve our collective love and support. Too many children, youth, and families are involved with child welfare systems. Too many children are forcibly separated from their families and communities. Even as the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), community and system leaders, activists, and organizers work to render the need for child welfare intervention obsolete, there remains an urgent need to better support and address the stigma and associated trauma that children and youth involved with child welfare systems experience.

This document summarizes the lessons learned and resources from six years of work with the getREAL initiative—an initiative focused on supporting the healthy sexual and identity development of children and youth involved with child welfare systems, particularly youth who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or who are gender expansive.[1] The getREAL initiative began its work with system leaders and community stakeholders

The getREAL initiative is guided by its acronym Recognize, Engage, Affirm, and Love.

- **Recognize:** Child welfare agencies must recognize the need to support the SOGIE of all children and youth as part of their healthy development. Systems must recognize the need to change and produce new policy guidelines and practice supports.
- **Engage:** Youth must be engaged in regularly talking about their SOGIE in normalized environments and conversation, much like talking about how they are doing in school, getting along with peers, etc.
- **Affirm:** It is critical that youth regularly feel encouraged, validated, and supported as they continue on their developmental journey. Child welfare systems, partners, and workers play an important role in affirming youth.
- **Love:** In the end, the goal is for youth to be healthy, happy, and loved.

to test how child welfare systems could thoughtfully identify and collect data about the sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) of *all* children and youth. As the work progressed, it expanded to take on the system challenges of creating affirmative and loving supports for LBGTQ+ children and youth. In collaboration with counties and states, the getREAL initiative sought to identify and implement new nondiscriminatory policies and practices that specifically promote the well-being of LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth.

From 2014-2020, the getREAL initiative:

1. Piloted and evaluated the _Guidelines for Managing Information Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGIE)_ in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.
2. Provided support to the California Department of Social Services on their _Continuum of Care Reform efforts_, so that there are SOGIE affirming placements for children and youth in the state and the child welfare systems transform to be affirming of children, youth, and families.
3. Supported a network of system and community leaders committed to changing child welfare interventions to be welcoming and affirming and to improving outcomes for LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth. getREAL consistently shared emerging and promising practices and policies through newsletters, listservs, and webinars.
4. Held convenings, webinars, and other events with national stakeholders, including youth involved in child welfare systems and peer advocates.
5. Wrote and disseminated policy briefs to support better outcomes for LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth, such as _Out of the Shadows_, _a Blueprint for Progress_, and _Supporting All Our Values_, and several policy briefs about how the new Family First Prevention Services Act could be implemented to support LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth.

The getREAL initiative found that effective system intervention needs to focus on affirming and celebrating the whole identity of youth. Our youth partners consistently said they want to be seen for their "whole selves"—that is, in the full beauty and complexity their multifaceted identities. Children and youth also expressed feeling disposable and unlovable by child welfare system workers and providers because of the color of their skin, whom they choose to love, how they present in terms of their gender, and other parts of their identity. Reform efforts must be antiracist and intersectional and recognize the impact of larger systemic racism as it manifests in the treatment of LBGTQ+ youth in the child welfare system.

> CSSP regularly offers the field policy and practice recommendations that are grounded in anti-racist intersectional ideas, make visible systemic racism and White supremacy as they operate in policies and practices, and identify ways to both end these practices and create new means of support." For a recent example, read _What We Owe Young Children: An Anti-Racist Policy Platform for Early Childhood_.

Affirming the whole identity of youth is essential and, at times, complicated. Youth hold many interlocking identities and thus to be effective, system interventions must not carve children up and address one aspect of their being. Efforts must work to counter the disproportionate number of Black, Native, and, in many jurisdictions, Latinx children and their disparately poor outcomes. Recognizing and planning for issues related to immigration status or disability are also critical. One bilingual transgender youth told us about being placed with a White lesbian couple who would not let them speak in Spanish to their monolingual mother. This youth said they would rather have been placed in a home that rejected their gender identity, than a home that was affirming of their gender but rejecting of their only means of connecting with their mother. There are many more incidents like this one that reveal the intersection and complexity of these issues.

Interventions that are not affirming cause youth to feel undermined or unsafe in revealing their whole identity to the adults attempting to help them. The failure to recognize and address youths' experiences of stigma, discrimination, and violence can result in the "helping" systems being complicit in further traumatization of children and youth. For example, Black youth told us that if the people they were working with were uncomfortable and unable to deal with their racial identity—a visible aspect of their identity— they would decide that it was unsafe to reveal their SOGIE—an aspect of their identity that was possible to hide.

12 LESSONS LEARNED

DATA	ACCOUNTABILITY
LEADERSHIP	IMPLEMENTATION TEAM
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS	POLICY
TRAINING & COACHING	PRACTICE TOOLS
SUPPORTING STAFF W/THEIR STRUGGLES	HUMAN RESOURCES
CONTRACTING	ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

The work of the getREAL initiative generated the following lessons for child welfare system and partners. These lessons lead to interrelated recommendations for system change that go significantly beyond collecting accurate data and that require steadfast leadership, holding workers accountable, community partnerships, policy changes, training and coaching of the workforce, infrastructure improvements to support the child welfare workforce, and environmental changes.

Understanding and acting on these lessons can help to support changemakers within and external to child welfare systems who need to build their capacity to thoughtfully identify LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth and create a welcoming and affirming child welfare system to support these youth and their families. We detail critical components to supporting system change below and provide an extensive list of resources from the getREAL initiative and our partners in the field.

1. DATA. Child welfare systems need to routinely collect data about a child's SOGIE but, more importantly, data must actually be used to ensure equity in services, resources, and outcomes.

Collecting and analyzing data is often the starting point of reform efforts. Child welfare systems collect all sorts of data—some of which are required by state and federal law, some of which are based on local practice.

Child welfare systems collect some data to assess aspects of well-being, such as the physical, mental, and educational needs and development of children and youth, but have paid little to no attention to a youth's healthy sexual and identity development—a key developmental task. To some extent, data related to identity development are collected solely in areas such as race and ethnicity of youth. Collecting SOGIE data enhance the system's ability to know and support the full identity of youth. This information is foundational to developing a case plan responsive

to the youth's needs, and to ensuring their safety, permanency, and well-being. For guidance on collecting SOGIE data, see *Guidelines for Managing Information Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGIE)* .

SOGIE data collection and the use of those data are needed to ensure that policy and organizational structures lead to practices that can meet the developmental needs of children and youth. Data should inform how effective policy and practice are developed and what is needed to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and youth. Understanding and using SOGIE data should influence resource allocation, and priority setting in systems that are often driven by multiple initiatives. Continuous examination and use of these data can better support child welfare systems and communities to understand the strategic investments and supports needed for children and families working through bias and rejection.

Using the SOGIE data collection guidelines to improve data collection and data sharing can also inform and help determine what communities need to better support children, youth, and families outside of the child welfare system. When communities can intervene and/or families feel they can seek help from community resources, there is less reliance on child welfare intervention to address family issues and less family separation. With significant investment and leadership, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania changed both their data systems to collect SOGIE information and simultaneously took steps to change institutional structures and support their workforce to ensure effective and higher quality data collection.   A process evaluation conducted by the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work details the steps Allegheny County took and the success and limitations they had after six years of effort.

2. ACCOUNTABILITY to youth and families must exist and be strong.

Child welfare systems are accountable to court orders, federal and state laws and regulations, and often local boards or commissioners. Yet, there are weak systems of accountability to families and communities that are the most impacted by system interventions. Throughout the getREAL network, there are state and local examples of efforts to ensure systems are accountable to the people they serve—Foster Youth Bill of Rights, Youth Ombudspeople and peer supports to name a few. These are examples of policies and processes that an individual family or youth can use to hold the system accountable to their individual case. Sometimes with success. However, there remains a need for stronger accountability measures to correct policies and practices that harm youth or families on a larger scale.

Successful system improvements should plan from the start for an accountability process linked to every element of implementation. For example, in Allegheny County, the child welfare leader supported Human Resources in ensuring that all staff attended the SOGIE training, the data team found opportunities to collect qualitative information through multiple tools from LGBTQ+ youth and provide information to staff, and the contract administrator included SOGIE

"A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring and retaining knowledge and at purposefully modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights."

Learning in Action: A guide to putting the learning organization to work David A Garvin, Harvard Business School Press, 2000

nondiscrimination expectations in contracts with providers and in the job of contract monitors. In this example, multiple parts of the system worked together to reinforce policy and expectations.

Accountability is best achieved in a learning organization, where every aspect of the institution is aligned and focused on providing the resources and supports needed to achieve the agency's mission. When this is in place, individuals hold each other accountable and work together to be accountable to children, youth, and families. One important element of creating a learning organization is a foundational commitment to mission and values. We recommend beginning the work with the development of guiding principles for collecting SOGIE data and creating welcoming and affirming child welfare systems. Principles serve as one mechanism to hold systems accountable to better practice and outcomes. Guiding principles, as illustrated in the SOGIE guidelines in the sidebar, should be developed collaboratively with community and subject to regular updating and repeated frequently to keep everyone on the same page.

The *Guidelines for Managing Information Related to SOGIE* rely on the following principles:

- All children deserve safety and acceptance in their homes and communities.
- All children need support and nurturance to develop and embrace all aspects of their evolving identities, including their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.
- Children thrive when their caregivers affirm and respect their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and family acceptance both protects against health risks and promotes overall health. Conversely, children experience negative health and mental health outcomes when their caregivers reject or fail to support their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.
- Children perceived by others to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or gender nonconforming are exposed to the same risks as children who openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

3. **LEADERSHIP. Strong and consistent leadership is critical to providing the authority, resources, and accountability necessary for system change.**

Ultimate accountability for ensuring welcoming and affirming child welfare systems rest with leadership. Child welfare leaders must continuously demonstrate a commitment to affirming all children and youth in their healthy identity development. They must message that healthy sexual and identity development is core to achieving safety, permanency, and well-being. Leaders also must support an intersectional approach, emphasizing that healthy sexual and identity development requires child welfare systems to focus on LGBTQ+ young people and their identities of race, ethnicity, ability, and immigration status.

The highest level of leadership must be visibly on board. Leadership must dedicate staff time (project manager/coordinator and adequate supporting staff) to ensure that SOGIE work is effectively designed and implemented. As noted in CSSP's qualitative review of Allegheny

County's SOGIE implementation, the long-term stable leadership of the Director and his deputies was essential for moving the work forward from concept to full implementation. (See *Progress Towards Building an Affirming and Supportive Child Welfare System: getREAL in Allegheny County for more information*.)

Examples of how leaders can demonstrate commitment and meaningfully move SOGIE reform efforts forward include:

- Regularly hearing directly from young people and their families about challenges and successes related to accessing affirming family engagement services.
- Prioritizing development and communication of nondiscriminatory policies and practices. Ensuring the ongoing review all policies, procedures, and best practices guides to promote affirming practice.
- Allocating funding for and mandating staff-wide training and coaching on supporting children and youth's health sexual and identity development and on new or existing policies that affirm LGBTQ+ children, youth, and families. Training must not just be about awareness and familiarity with terms, but also about affirming policies and practices and skill development with workers. Leaders should regularly convey the importance of staff attending these trainings.
- Conducting outreach and engagement with community members who are formally or informally supporting LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth, including those who are Black, Latinx, and Native.
- Dedicating resources and crafting funding opportunities to welcome additional contractors with the expertise necessary to provide affirming services and identify SOGIE-related issues.
- Designating funding opportunities that are specifically dedicated to recruit families who can effectively work with LGBTQ+ young people that are from the young people's communities of origin.
- Ensuring that family reunification plans are developed, and services are put in place to work with families that may not be affirming.
- Building capacity by working with local transgender and gender expansive expert community-based organizations and other experts that work intersectionality across SOGIE and race/ethnicity.
- Highlighting with staff and the larger community efficiencies gained when family engagement services can limit conflict in the home related to a young person's SOGIE.
- Creating a process of staff support and healing for those who are LGBTQ+ or gender expansive and have experienced harassment or discrimination in the workplace.
- Clearly identifying and sharing the consequences for stakeholders (including staff, providers, and resource parents) that are resistant to implementing affirming family engagement services and publicly holding providers and staff accountable should they fail to be affirming.
- Identifying and implementing the disciplinary procedures that may be exercised if staff discriminate against LGBTQ+ youth.

Lastly, system leaders should promote staff leadership at every level in this system transformation effort. Structures should be in place for staff at every level to have input into system changes and that input should be noted, affirmed, and clearly valued.

4. **IMPLEMENTATION TEAM. A diverse range of stakeholders, including youth and community members, is necessary to designing and implementing the system change efforts.**

Forming an Implementation team is a necessary step toward designing and implementing the collection and use of SOGIE data. Implementation team members should understand how data are collected and shared, specifically working with child welfare systems to understand the parameters of privacy and access to SOGIE data. The Implementation team should also help shape the content of data collection, for example, defining the labels that are used to describe various aspects of a child/youth's identity. The Implementation team also should understand how data are collected and shared, specifically working with child welfare systems to understand the parameters of privacy and access to SOGIE data. (For an example of how an Implementation team was used, see the Allegheny County evaluation report in the Resources section).

The implementation team should include a cross section of people with knowledge of the child welfare system (including its data systems); experience working with affirming LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth and have direct access to individuals in power who can clear obstacles and/or provide resources to support changes. Team members should also possess qualities that will make this work successful including an ability to think creatively and an understanding of the structural inequities that contribute to the overrepresentation of children and youth of color and LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth in child welfare systems.

Ideally, stakeholders' representation on the team should include:
- Youth representation (more than one youth/peer advocate);
- Caregivers (parents, kin caregivers, foster parents);
- Court officials, judges;
- Attorneys (including GALs, parent attorneys, CASAs);
- Data analysts and Information Technology staff who can help problem solve about privacy and other IT issues;
- Practitioners who collect the data;
- Policy writers; and
- Those who can champion and translate the practice change needed (e.g., case practice specialists).

Having a visible SOGIE implementation team reinforces the intentional nature of this work and the larger accountability required to ensure system improvement.

5. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS for developing supportive practices, understanding the culture and needs in communities, and ensuring that support for children, youth, and families is not dependent on child welfare involvement are essential.

Child welfare systems must collaborate with community partners who have expertise in working with LGBTQ+ youth and who listen to and can be guided by Black, Latinx, and/or Native LGBTQ+ youth who are disproportionately involved in child welfare services.[2] The partnership should inform policy and practice shifts and gain the necessary community support to implement system reform efforts. Far too often, child welfare systems begin new initiatives and then bring in and inform community partners of their efforts at a later point. *Outreach and engagement should occur at the very beginning* and include significant outreach and advice from LGBTQ+ organizations, especially including those known for working with people of color. Other key community partners include:

- Child welfare service providers;
- Faith-based partners who are affirming;
- Service providers in other systems, such as runaway and homeless service providers, schools, juvenile justice, health, mental health;
- Youth-led organizations such as Youth Boards, Genders and Sexualities Associations, etc.; and
- Parent organizations such as PFLAG.

Meaningful, reinforcing community partner efforts include:

- Bringing the voice of LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth consistently to the table and making their experiences and insights central to the work;
- Reviewing and supporting SOGIE training, including sending staff to trainings and identifying staff who can become trainers;
- Rethinking who can best provide contracted services to LGBTQ+ children and youth, especially LGBTQ+ youth who have been felt excluded from the existing network of services, such as queer girls of color, transgender youth, LGBTQ+ youth with autism; and
- Investing in a robust service array to meet the SOGIE needs of all youth in the community, with attention to youth who have experienced the greatest marginalization by the community.

6. POLICY development is needed to support and sustain effective practice implementation.

Many getREAL partners and jurisdictions have developed written policy over the last five years in support of creating a welcoming and affirming child welfare system for LGBTQ+ youth. See the Resources section for links to specific examples of state policies supporting SOGIE data collection and affirming interactions and placements for LGBTQ+ youth. Policy must be developed before expecting the workforce to regularly collect SOGIE data. Policy also needs to be developed before training staff and holding them accountable.

At a minimum, policies should:

- Prohibit any form of discrimination, including discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, different ability, gender identity and expression and delineate the steps that will be taken when violations occur.
- Be posted in highly visible areas in all areas of the offices, in provider's offices and in facilities and it should be referenced in all documents/memos that are produced.
- Be stated in all Human Resources notices for hiring and promotion, and in all performance review tools.

Written policy is foundational, but it is never enough; it is in the implementation where we find variation, lack of fidelity, and sometimes outright resistance. Therefore, training, staff supports, and human resources actions all must work to reinforce new policy with the workforce, including contracted providers and resource parents, and hold all accountable. See Resources section for examples of state and county policies and CSSP's Principles of Anti-Racist Policymaking.

7. TRAINING AND COACHING to support the child welfare workforce in understanding and applying new affirming policies and practices.

Most reform efforts involving changed worker practices usually include a component of classroom training and limited coaching and support. While training is sometimes an effective means to provide child welfare workers with new knowledge and skills, coaching is also necessary to ensure what is learned is applied in their work. The getREAL initiative found that training and support is necessary for all staff including reception, security, and any staff who are in contact with clients and visitors to the agency. This extensive reach is necessary to ensure that the overall environment of the agency is welcoming and affirming and that there is real and sustainable culture change.

Training

Trainers should be representative of the diversity of the agency and community. SOGIE training should incorporate the historical perspective of how systems perpetuate oppression and the commitment and vision of the child welfare agency to end that oppression. The getREAL initiative found that training often produced resistance from some in the workforce. Resistance ranged from passive aggressive behavior (not showing up, showing up late, or being disengaged during training) to outright hostility with homophobic and transphobic remarks. Debriefing and ongoing support for the training staff is critical to building a successful training team.

Several jurisdictions and technical assistance providers have developed training specific to understanding SOGIE and to creating a welcoming and affirming practice for LGBTQ+ and gender expansive children, youth, and families.[3] We recommend that any training covers:

- Basic overview of terms related to SOGIE, intersectional analysis of race and SOGIE and child welfare involvement, historical understanding of racism, homophobia, and transphobia in the child welfare system, and a basic review of trauma. This part of the training could include:
  - Youth participation (video and/or live) in sharing their lived experiences
  - Providing staff with a chance to share experiences in dyads
  - Specific work on gender identity and understanding transgender identity development from an early age
  - Review of the child welfare system's policy on SOGIE

- Moving from policy to practice
  - This part of the training should focus on welcoming and affirming engagement of children, youth, and families and other affirming practices. The getREAL initiative found that initially many child welfare staff struggled with talking with youth about sexuality and identity. They needed and wanted several opportunities for hands-on practice. Although these are staff who talk with youth and families about sensitive matters all the time, we found that workers had anxiety and discomfort in exploring SOGIE. One clear lesson is that there must be a significant skill building and practice time for the workforce. Supervisors also need learn about and to practice how to support their staff with SOGIE skill development and improved practice both in supervision and performance review processes.

Coaching

Coaching is an important aspect of instilling and supporting consistent effective practice after staff receive SOGIE training. The coaching should be phased in as needed. It should be intensive at first and then, upon mutual determination of the coach and respective staff, be available as needed.

Other case practice supports can be identified through ongoing formal input from workers and supervisors about what is needed. For example, in Allegheny County, we found that highly skilled clinical staff tasked with supporting frontline workers on site and in the moment can make a big difference in ensuring the best thinking goes into planning and supporting youth and families.

System leaders, working with the Implementation team and community partners, should regularly evaluate practice across the organization and determine if and when to provide booster training and/or higher-level training and support that is responsive to specific areas of concern related to LGBTQ+ children, youth, and families.

8. **TOOLS to reinforce good practice should be developed and readily available to staff.**

The getREAL initiative found that system change required a variety of tools to reinforce practice improvement with the child welfare workforce. Examples of tools used and found effective by getREAL and our partners include:

- *Standards of Practice* provide short and specific clarification of policy on topics staff are struggling with, such as confidentiality of SOGIE data. Ideally these are one-pagers that are made available and accessible to staff and can be introduced and discussed in all trainings where needed. They can also be available online where workers can access them when they have questions about a case. See Resources for examples of Standards of Practice in Allegheny County.

- *Tip Sheets* are similar to Standards and are short and concise one-pagers that are available online as well. They can provide tips about terms that youth use; using names/pronouns; assessing placement decisions; talking with families about SOGIE and so on. Consider developing tip sheets with youth and community partners.

- *Reflective Supervision* has been shown to prevent burnout and staff turnover. Adequate staffing is required to effectively implement a reflective supervision model. We strongly encourage child welfare systems to only implement this model if they can truly commit to sustaining the investment of resources. Too often, systems say they are doing this, but never fully develop the practice or devote the time and resources to sustain it. The reflective supervision model should include a qualitative evaluation to assess whether it is really working as intended.

- *Assessment tools* such as Child and Adolescents Needs and Services (CANS) need to include questions about a young person's identity. Our work in Allegheny County showed that, as the CANS assessors began talking with youth, they soon learned that youth were more comfortable talking about their identity than they initially thought would be the case. Training, tip sheets, and practice supports are needed for the tools to be effectively administered in a welcoming and affirming manner. Allegheny County, and other jurisdictions, have separately worked to amend the CANS to include SOGIE information. See Resources section for examples.

- *Quality Service Reviews or Child and Family Reviews* are used by all child welfare agencies as part of the federal review process or state-based improvement efforts. These tools can be modified to include questions about identity development and how the system is supporting this development. The information gathered from these reviews can be used to assess and support both systemic change and the practice that children, youth, and families experience. See Resources for an example from the state of New Jersey.

9. SUPPORTING STAFF CHALLENGED IN WORKING WITH LGBTQ+ and GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH.

There will be staff who struggle with personal or religious beliefs that they think conflict with being welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth. There will also be staff who have difficulty talking with youth about their SOGIE even when their beliefs are not an issue.

Here are some suggestions to consider in supporting staff based on our work:

- It is important that these staff should be acknowledged, and their concerns respected. Workers will appreciate being heard and their perspective valued.
- Time should be spent on supportive, facilitated discussions, including the use of guest speakers from the faith community, to support workers in not inflicting harm on children, youth, and families. Specifically, guest speakers could speak to workers struggling between their faith and/or culture and their job to be affirming to LGBTQ+ and gender expansive children, youth, and families.
- Some workers can work through their beliefs and discomfort with a thoughtful, systemic approach. The time it takes to support them should be anticipated and incorporated into any training and coaching from the beginning.
- As part of being a learning and improving organization, staff who are champions of efforts to be a welcoming and affirming organization should be a part of helping staff who need support.
- The Agency must stand behind and support staff who are leaders/champions and use their leadership through, for example, peer to peer processes that can support change implementation.
- Ongoing support groups and/or supervision can help to move all staff to affirming practice. Ultimately if staff cannot work through this and accept and respond to professional development, this becomes an accountability issue.
- The performance evaluation system needs to be robust with lots of professional development offered before moving to discipline as a remedy.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES is an important component of the infrastructure supports needed to build a welcoming and affirming child welfare system.

The child welfare system's Human Resources Division (HR) must be an engaged part of SOGIE reform work. During the course of the getREAL initiative, our partners shared examples of staff resistant to SOGIE training and engaging and supporting youth around their SOGIE. The HR division is an important player in helping staff understand the connection between their behaviors and their performance assessment. HR should lead the work in continuing to assess and revise performance assessments and professional development opportunities and processes. Staff cannot be held accountable or even better hold each other accountable unless there is an operational HR committed to supporting the learning and development of staff and willing to support discipline after professional development and other corrective measures have been exhausted. HR is a component of a learning organization—providing both support and accountability.

HR must:

- Review SOGIE related policies and ensure professional development opportunities exist for staff who need it.
- Work with those responsible for staff development and training in aligning their work with the performance/professional development process.
- Ensure all staff review and sign the nondiscriminatory policy to affirm they have read and know the policy and agree to abide by it.
- Provide a safe process for staff who are LGBTQ+ or gender expansive and have experienced discrimination or harassment by other staff.
- Ensure hiring notices provide interested applicants with information about the nondiscrimination policy, the expectations of the organization for supporting families, and the ways in which a potential hire will be assessed.
- Work with leadership to ensure that interviews for new hires are conducted with a team reflective of the make-up of the organizations and the engaged community and devise open-ended questions that assess the ability of the applicant to meet the expectations of the agency's mission, including the commitments on equity. Do not hire people who cannot meet the expectations.
- Promotional opportunities need to clearly state the expectation of the leadership and qualities needed to be considered for higher level positions. Part of the requirements should include a commitment to equity and ensuring a welcoming and affirming experience for LGBTQ+ youth. A team reflective of the organization and community needs to interview applicants and for higher level positions, interviews by stakeholders should be part of the selection process. Do not promote anyone who cannot make this commitment.

Public bureaucracies have been viewed as weak in holding staff accountable, largely due to the lack of a strong HR function. Building a strong HR function and making difficult HR decisions are necessary for a child welfare system that values both supporting staff through learning and accountability.

11. CONTRACTING requirements should incorporate and reinforce agency SOGIE policy and goals to create a welcoming and affirming environment for all children and youth

Contracts must include explicit language that outlines the agency policy, values, and vision. The agency's non-discrimination policy needs to be included and corrective action for any violations of the policy by a contracted provider clearly described. Contractors should be required to comply with, support through professional development and enforce the nondiscrimination policy with their own staff. Potential contractors' proposals should be reviewed with a team that includes stakeholders who will be directly impacted by the services of the contractor. Contracts should be evaluated based on the organization's ability to meet these standards. (See Resources for tools on assessing contracts and program statements).

"DHS also enhanced their contracts and the knowledge of the contracted providers. Now when DHS contracts with providers, each contract contains nondiscrimination language related to SOGIE. Contracts also required all providers to receive training on SOGIE. Further, three of the contract monitors have achieved the training and knowledge to be trainers on SOGIE for the department. As a result of this increased infrastructure, contract monitors have been able to rectify situations when youth have been harassed or discriminated against in group care settings."

Progress towards Building an Affirming and Supportive Child Welfare System
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

Contractor monitors should be trained on the nondiscrimination policy and have a full understanding of SOGIE competent practice expectations. Contract monitors should examine incident reports for SOGIE concerns and work with providers to ensure staff have the knowledge and skills to support the SOGIE of all children and youth with whom they work.

Finally, ongoing evaluation of the services provided by the contractor are needed. Quality Service Reviews or other qualitative methods of evaluating the experiences of children, youth, and families provided services should be part of that evaluation. Surveys of youth and staff can also be helpful in assessing the services and ensuring the most effective contracting process. Evaluation methodologies must be designed to explicitly determine the experience of Black and Native children and youth and LGBTQ+ and gender expansive children and youth; sometimes this requires oversampling or targeted reviews, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how these children and youth are experiencing the interventions of the contracted provider.

12. ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES can provide visible signs of welcome and affirmation.

"The IA[Institutional Analysis] team found many visible signs of welcome and affirmation for LGBTQ+ individuals. At the DHS Smithfield office, a poster now hangs in the lobby stating 'We support LGBTQ+ youth.' This poster, designed by a youth involved with CYF, has a prominent place in the lobby, but isn't the only sign of welcome and affirmation. Brochures with information about supports for LGBTQ+ youth are also in the lobby and at different points throughout the year either a rainbow pride flag, showing support for diverse sexual orientations, or a transgender pride flag, showing support for diverse gender identities, is hung in the lobby. Gender neutral bathrooms have been built in all offices. These single staff bathrooms are also accessible for people with disabilities."

Progress towards Building an Affirming and Supportive Child Welfare System
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

When a child, youth, parent or community member walks into an agency office they should see images that give them a sense that they might be welcomed and seen, rather than merely viewed as another case. All staff need to be trained in customer service. How people are greeted as they enter through security and reception are vital and begin the experience and engagement of the youth and families. Pictures on the wall, flags, signs, and pamphlets in waiting rooms help to ease suspicion and support initial feelings that they can have some trust that they will be engaged and supported. For example, agencies should have or create gender-neutral bathrooms. Further, the agency website provides an opportunity to signal the expectation that all clients will be welcomed and affirmed when interacting with the child welfare system. Our experience is that staff also are impacted positively when their physical environment reinforces their beliefs. When the physical environment is consistent with and communicates the agency's vision and expectations, staff and the public they serve can fully understand and take pride in their efforts and outcomes.

RESOURCES

Data
- Guidelines for Managing Information Related to Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity and Expression of Children in Child Welfare Systems (2013)
- SOGIE* Data Collection, All Children All Families, Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2017)

Tools
- Working with LGBTQ Individuals: Professional Expectations
- Expectations for Serving LGBTQ Individuals
- Communication Related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression: Language, Terminology, and Preferred Names and Gender Pronouns
- Office of Children, Youth, and Families: Documentation of Information Related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)
- Housing and Placement with LGBTQ Individuals
- Expectations for Serving LGBTQ Individuals
- Making LGBTQ Appropriate Referrals
- Understanding Disclosure Related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression Information

getREAL California Tools
- Components of a SOGIE Inclusive Agency
- Welcoming & Affirming Transgender Children in Congregate Care
- Checklist to Assess Organizations' SOGIE Capacity
- SOGIE Evaluation Tool for Organizations
- Family Builders' Child Welfare Workforce Tools to Support Talking with Children, Youth, and Families:
  - Hotline
  - Emergency Response
  - Dependency Investigation
  - Family Maintenance and Reunification
  - Permanency Planning for Caregivers
- Foster Youth Bill of Rights

Tools From Other Jurisdictions
- New Jersey Quality Review Protocol with Reference Guide for Consideration of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression, p. 59 (January 2016)
- Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning/queer youth, Minnesota Department of Human Services
- Safe and Respected: Policy, Best Practices, and Guidance for Serving Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Children and Youth Involved in the Child Welfare, Detention, and Juvenile Justice Systems. New York City's Administration for Children's Services Office of LGBTQ Policy and Practice Perry, J.R., & Green, E.R. (2014)

National Policy Recommendations
- Advancing Healthy Outcomes: Eight Ways to Promote the Health and Well-being of LGBTQ+ Youth Involved with Child Welfare through FFPSA (August 2019)
- Supporting All Our Values: How Publicly Funded, Faith-Based Child Welfare Providers and Non-Discrimination Laws Can Promote Well-Being (February 2019)

- Safe Havens: Closing the Gap Between Recommended Practice and Reality for Transgender and Gender-Expansive Youth in Out-of-Home Care (April 2017)
- A Blueprint for Progress: Supporting LGBTQ Youth of Color in Child Welfare Systems (2016)
- Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross System Collaboration (2016)
- Principles for Anti-Racist Policymaking (2020)

State & Local Policy Examples

- County of Sacramento's Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Protective Services, Anti-Harassment and Non-Discrimination Policy
- County of Santa Clara, Policy Against Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation
- State of Tennessee Department of Children's Services' Guidelines for Managing Children/Youth in DCS Custody Related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression
- Vermont Department for Children and Families, Working with Families: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Children and Youth

Assessments & Evaluations

Allegheny County

- Progress Towards Building an Affirming and Supportive Child Welfare System: getREAL in Allegheny County (April 2019)
- Implementing System Wide Policy and Practice Improvements to Support LGBTQ+ Youth and Families with Child Welfare System Involvement (May 2021)
- Moving a Child Welfare System to Be More Affirming of the LGBTQ Community: Strategies, Challenges and Lessons Learned Initiative from 2009 through 2016 (June 2018). This document, produced by Allegheny County Department of Human Services, summarizes the counties work to better serve the LGBTQ community.

California

- Santa Clara and Fresno County: Final Report (2016)
- Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) Children in California Foster Care (February 2016)

For more resources and tools on child welfare training curriculum and interventions with LGBTQ+ youth see the Quality Improvement Center on LGBTQ2S https://qiclgbtq2s.org/category/resources/.