

The GLBT Health Access Project: A State-Funded Effort to Improve Access to Care

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The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Health Access Project is a unique public-private collaboration working to eliminate barriers to health care for the GLBT community, foster development of comprehensive, culturally appropriate health promotion policies and health care services for GLBT people and their families, and expand appropriate data collection on GLBT health.

Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the project developed community standards of practice for provision of quality health care services to GLBT clients. A health access training curriculum was developed and technical assistance was offered to health care providers implementing the standards, which cover personnel, clients' rights, intake and assessment, service delivery and planning, confidentiality, and community outreach and health promotion.

Training participants (324 individuals from 89 agencies) reported positive though not statistically significant changes in attitude.

The GLBT project grew out of a support network of employees and allies who began meeting regularly at the Department of Public Health in 1994. They recognized that fear of discrimination and stigma kept many in the GLBT community from seeking care for themselves or their families and that others, once in care, withheld personal information that their health care providers needed to provide appropriate care and treatment. To address these

barriers to care, the group envisioned a partnership between the Department of Public Health, community-based health and human services agencies, and GLBT individuals and allies to raise awareness of health issues; reduce barriers to health care and prevention services; and improve health norms for GLBT people across Massachusetts.

Department staff met with representatives of community-based agencies to develop a proposal to address GLBT health care access needs, and in 1997 the GLBT Health Access Project was funded through a 5-year contract with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Since then the project, which is housed at JRI Health in Boston, has worked with partners in the community to develop model standards of practice and a training curriculum for providers, create a media campaign addressing homophobia in health care, build a GLBT health Web site, and assess the health needs of GLBT individuals in Massachusetts.

Developing Community Standards of Practice

An early priority was development of standards for health care and related services provided to GLBT individuals and their families. A statewide health care provider survey and a 1997 project report¹ detailed a serious lack of awareness and understanding of GLBT health issues among providers in Massachusetts. Some providers believed they had no GLBT clients or staff; many were unsure about their role in identifying and addressing GLBT issues; and few had developed policies to guide staff or clients.

The GLBT Health Access Project started with key informant interviews with GLBT health care providers to assess the viability of developing standards and to generate support early on. It then convened a working group of

some 60 participants—Department of Public Health representatives, service providers (including doctors, nurses, social workers, mental health workers, and substance abuse professionals) and administrators, community-based agency representatives, consumers, and patient advocates—that was diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Over a 10-month period, the group reached consensus on 14 community standards of practice and corresponding quality indicators that provide a framework for improving access to care and assisting providers in creating responsive environments of care.²

The community standards address agency administrative practices and service delivery components, including personnel policies, clients' rights, intake and assessment, confidentiality, and community outreach and health promotion (see Table 1). In January 1999, the standards were distributed to more than 400 Department of Public Health-funded providers, along with a letter of support from the Commissioner of Public Health.

Provider Training and Technical Assistance

The next step was to create a training curriculum and technical assistance component to give providers the tools and support necessary to implement the standards within their agencies. The GLBT Health Access Project worked with Fenway Community Health, a community health facility in Boston that has provided services to members of the GLBT community since 1971, to develop a basic 3- to 4-hour curriculum. Provided free to health and social services agencies, the interactive training covers personal attitudes that may perpetuate barriers to care, cultural competence in working with GLBT individuals, specific barriers to accessing health care, and personal and institutional plans for implementing the standards. The training can be adjusted to meet specific time and content needs of individual agencies, and it includes optional medical and mental health components. Resource manuals provide supplementary materials on psychosocial and medical issues, bibliographies, and resource lists.

Despite a strong initial response to the Department of Public Health's mailing, only a small number of agencies followed through to arrange training. Factors influencing this low response included difficulty in obtaining administrative approval to undertake the training, time constraints for providers, institutional

Key Findings

- Fear of discrimination and stigma keep many in the GLBT community from seeking care for themselves or their families or from disclosing relevant personal information once in care.
- Comprehensive standards of practice for health care services for GLBT clients, developed with community participation, facilitate development of health access training and technical assistance to educate providers and consumers about culturally competent care.
- Expanding appropriate data collection and GLBT-specific health-related research is an integral component of efforts to improve access to health care for GLBT individuals and their families.
- Elimination of barriers to care requires change at the health care service system level, cultural competence and skill building at the provider level, and development of advocacy strategies at the consumer level.

TABLE 1—The 14 Community Standards of Practice for Provision of Quality Health Care Services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) Clients Developed by the GLBT Health Access Project, Boston, Mass

Personnel

Communicate an inclusive, nondiscriminatory workplace environment for GLBT employees
Encourage visibility of GLBT employees
Ensure that all GLBT employees are subject to the same terms and conditions of employment as other employees, including benefits and compensation

Clients' rights

Implement comprehensive policies prohibiting discrimination in the delivery of services to GLBT clients and their families
Implement comprehensive, client-friendly procedures for filing and resolution of complaints alleging violations of these policies

Intake and assessment

Develop and implement GLBT-inclusive intake and assessment procedures

Service planning and delivery

Ensure that all agency staff are familiar with GLBT issues as they relate to agency services
Ensure that direct care staff routinely provide general care to GLBT clients and their families and are competent to identify and address specific health problems and treatment issues, provide appropriate treatment, and provide appropriate referrals when necessary
Ensure that all case management and treatment plans include sexual orientation and gender identity when it is a necessary and appropriate issue in client care

Confidentiality

Ensure confidentiality of client data, including information about sexual orientation and gender identity issues, and inform GLBT clients about data collection that includes references to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, including how and when such information might be disclosed
Provide appropriate, safe, and confidential treatment to GLBT minors, including informing minor clients of their legal rights and of the possibility and possible consequences of any mandatory reporting

Community relations and health promotion

Include GLBT people and their families in outreach and health promotion efforts
Include GLBT representation on agency boards of directors and other institutional bodies
Include GLBT people and their families in community benefits programs offered in the communities the agency serves

homophobia, and the voluntary nature of participation. Nevertheless, the curriculum was pilot-tested at 2 sites, and by June 2000, 10 training sessions had been completed, reaching 324 individuals from 89 agencies across Massachusetts. Participant evaluations showed positive (though not statistically significant) attitude change and uniform satisfaction with the training. Three-month follow-up evaluation instruments and procedures are being revised to improve the response rate.

Ongoing technical assistance is offered to help agencies assess existing policies and implement new ones where necessary. Staff from the GLBT Health Access Project and Fenway work with human resources personnel, clinical staff, and agency directors to craft workplace policies, inclusive intake and assessment forms, and appropriate training programs to develop welcoming, culturally competent care. Future initiatives will include collaborations with medical, nursing, and mental health training programs, among others.

GLBT-Specific Data

The Department of Public Health and the community partners who created the GLBT Health Access Project also recognized the importance of collecting GLBT-specific health-

related data. In addition to the 1997 report on GLBT health concerns, the Department of Public Health funded a JSI Research and Training Institute survey of lesbians and gay men in greater Boston about their use of health services.³ Separate focus groups of bisexual and transgendered individuals resulted in detailed information about access and barriers to care for those individuals.⁴⁻⁶

The project worked to identify existing GLBT-specific data, improve data collection, and address potential problems related to increased data collection in the GLBT community. Working with the Department of Public Health, the GLBT Health Access Project advocated the inclusion of a sexual orientation measure on the 1998 Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, laying the groundwork for inclusion of items measuring same-sex sexual behavior in the 2000 survey. The project continues to survey state and local program staff to identify where data on sexual orientation and gender identity might be added in existing public health databases and to address concerns about the possibility of inappropriate use of such information in confidential databases or client records.

The GLBT Health Access Project represents a unique model of public-private collaboration whose success is built on leadership

by public officials, community-based advocacy, and provider commitment. Only such an integrated approach can create and sustain systemic change at the health care service system level, cultural competence and skill building at the provider level, and development of advocacy strategies at the consumer level. □

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Resources

GLBT health-related research and information is available through the project's Web site (<http://www.glbthealth.org>).

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