

Policy Paper: LGBTQAI2S+ Houselessness in the Portland Region

Introduction

Jupiter¹, who uses ze/zir pronouns, moved to Portland in 2018 after a change in zir living situation forced ze to quit zir two jobs on the East Coast, and then a gig in Washington that didn't pan out. Like many gender non-conforming people, ze didn't have family support. When Jupiter ran out of money for hotel rooms, ze was told to go to a men's shelter. "I'm sure the person who told me this thought I was a man," remembers Jupiter, who also identifies as Afro-Indigenous. "There was no LGBT+ shelter I could go to. I thought to myself, 'How can Portland be so LGBT+ friendly, allegedly, but not have these kinds of things accessible for people regaining self-sufficiency?'"

Faera, who identifies as transgender and Black, had a similar experience. After being verbally assaulted for being trans on public transit in L.A., she visited Portland in the hopes that it would be more affirming—and it was. "I wore make-up for the first time," she recalls. "I bought dresses. I said, I can be myself here." But when Faera actually moved here and experienced housing instability, she found few resources that felt safe: "When you're queer and trans, the options are slim to none." Eventually, she secured long-term shelter with help from an assortment of community members, but she says there remains a need for a more formal system of support for queer people experiencing

¹ This is a pseudonym.

houselessness, if Portland is to live up to its promise for people like her. “A lot of people are coming here because they want freedom,” she says, “but the system is not built for us.”

As of June 2023, 19 states had enacted laws making it more difficult for transgender, non-binary, and other LGBTQ+ people to access healthcare, learn in school, and simply exist in public. As Faera’s story suggests, this wave of transphobia and homophobia is already resulting in a migration of queer refugees to LGBTQAI2S+ friendly states like Oregon. Despite Oregon and Portland’s Pride Flag–waving reputation, our community is not well prepared to welcome these newcomers, many of whom face barriers to housing and other supports.

In this policy paper, we discuss what the data reveals about LGBTQAI2S+ people and houselessness, identify the gaps and assets for queer people in the Portland region’s houseless-services system, and offer recommendations for achieving a more inclusive, equitable, and effective system for LGBTQAI2S+ Portlanders, current and future.

Houselessness Among LGBTQAI2S+ People

LGBTQAI2S+ people are more likely to have experienced houselessness than heterosexual, cisgender people. A 2020 study by UCLA’s Williams Institute found that 16.9% of “sexual minority adults” had experienced houselessness at some point in their life—more than twice the percentage estimated by another study of the general population.

Regardless of their sexual orientation, transgender people are more likely to have experienced houselessness than their cisgender peers. The Williams Institute study found that 8.3% of trans people had experienced houselessness in the year before being interviewed, compared with 2.5% of cis (and genderqueer) “sexual minorities” and 1.4% of cis straight people. According to a brief from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAHE), the number of trans people experiencing houselessness is growing, nearly doubling between 2016 and 2020. Unhoused trans people (and especially unsheltered trans people) interact with the healthcare and criminal legal system with alarming frequency: The NAHE brief reports that over a six-month period, members of this population had, on average, 2.6 ambulance rides, 7.6 emergency-room visits, 21.3 police contacts, and 8 jail/prison stays.

Systemic racism and anti-Blackness intersect with and compound LGBTQAI2S+ houselessness. According to the Williams Institute study, among cis and genderqueer sexual minorities, Black people were almost four times as likely as their white counterparts to have recently experienced houselessness.

LGBTQAI2S+ young people—and especially trans and non-binary young people—are more likely to have experienced houselessness than their straight, cis peers. A recent report from the Trevor Project (based on data from the 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health) found that 35-39% of trans or non-binary youth have experienced houselessness or housing instability—far more than the 23% of cisgender youth who have. Per the report,

16% of LGBTQ youth said that they had slept away from their parents or caregivers because they ran away from home, and 14% said they had done so because they were kicked out or abandoned.

Data on houselessness among LGBTQAI2S+ people in the Portland region is incomplete and inadequate. As of 2022, the Point-In-Time Count of people experiencing houselessness in Multnomah County collected data on gender identity, but not sexual orientation. According to the Point-In-Time Count report, 1.4% of those counted identified as transgender, and 1.7% identified as a gender that is not singularly female or male. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which houseless-services providers in Multnomah County are required to use, also only collects data on gender identity. Based on HMIS data, the Joint Office of Homeless Services' System Performance Report for the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2023 found that of those "enrolled" in a shelter program in FY23, 1.4% identified as trans and 2.7% identified as a gender other than singularly male or female.

Sources:

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Local Gaps & Assets for LGBTQAI2S+ People Experiencing Houselessness

Despite the over-representation of LGBTQAI2S+ people among people experiencing houselessness, there are not enough culturally specific or responsive houseless services for this population in the Portland region. Compared to other areas with large queer communities, Portland does not measure up: Los Angeles, for example, recently funded a transitional shelter for transgender Latinas, while San Francisco committed more than \$7 million to an initiative to end transgender houselessness by 2027.

Although non-LGBTQAI2S+ community organizations in Portland provide houseless services to LGBTQAI2S+ people, they do so with varying levels of sensitivity and proficiency. Importantly, this includes culturally specific organizations serving communities of color. Unhoused queer people and those who directly serve them report that even some groups that claim to offer services in a LGBTQAI2S+ culturally responsive manner are not consistently affirming, and are sometimes critically under-resourced. As a

result, many queer people experiencing houselessness don't feel comfortable accessing these services and/or don't stay engaged in them. As with other marginalized communities, organizations and programs run by LGBTQAI2S+ people are uniquely well-positioned to reach and serve unhoused LGBTQAI2S+ people.

There are currently more houseless services in the Portland region for LGBTQAI2S+ youth than for adults. Outside In provides LGBTQAI2S+ culturally responsive transitional housing and community housing resources for queer unhoused youth, alongside identity-affirming community and activities and gender-affirming primary care. Meanwhile, New Avenues for Youth operates Unity House, a group home for LGBTQAI2S+ young people experiencing houselessness. New Avenues is also the parent organization of the Sexual & Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) and The Living Room, queer youth day centers featuring food, clothing, and hygiene supplies; peer support; and mental-health services.

For adult LGBTQAI2S+ people experiencing houselessness, there exist some culturally specific services to prevent eviction, provide transitional housing, deliver support services, and meet basic needs. There remain, however, notable gaps along the houseless-services continuum.

Eviction prevention: Black & Beyond the Binary Collective provides emergency rent assistance, prioritizing transgender and non-binary Black people, and PDX Trans Housing Coalition provides emergency rent assistance for all trans people

experiencing housing instability, but neither group has nearly enough funding to meet the need. Cascade AIDS Project (CAP) also provides emergency rent assistance, but only for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Emergency shelter: There are no LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific emergency shelters in the Portland region. Furthermore, many local emergency shelters are gender-binary (i.e., only accept men or women), which discourages transgender and non-binary people from accessing them.

Transitional housing: PDX Trans Housing Coalition and Pride Northwest provide short-term motel stays for LGBTQAI2S+ people. CAP offers medical respite care (as well as short-term housing)--though again, only for people living with HIV/AIDS. Quest Center for Integrative Health provides small-scale transitional housing (i.e., group homes) specifically for queer people in recovery. Finally, mainstream organizations operate two alternative shelters for LGBTQAI2S+ people: the 35-sleeping-unit Queer Affinity Village, run by All Good Northwest, and the 12-sleeping-unit Parkrose Community Village, run by WeShine.

Housing case management: The Equi Institute's Community Health Workers provide culturally specific support to community members overcoming housing barriers, however CAP is the only LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific organization in the area that is currently funded to provide traditional housing case management, and this service is only available for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Permanent housing: CAP is also the only local, queer culturally specific organization currently funded to provide permanent housing. Eligibility for this tenant-based rent assistance is based on HIV status. The mainstream organization Transition Projects operates a scattered-site permanent housing program for transgender and non-binary people, though capacity is extremely limited.

Support services: The Q Center, PDX Trans Housing Coalition, the Equi Institute, Quest Center, and CAP all provide LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific peer and/or social support.

Basic needs: PDX Trans Housing Coalition and CAP (through Esther's Pantry) both offer food assistance focused on LGBTQAI2S+ people. The Q Center also offers clothing for queer people, as does CAP (via Tod's Corner).

Policy Recommendations

Apply an LGBTQAI2S+ equity analysis in houseless services.

Policymakers, government agencies, and community-based service providers should be aware of the houselessness disparities that LGBTQAI2S+ people experience, and should routinely consider the potential barriers that people experiencing houselessness may face due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as potential strategies for reducing or eliminating those barriers. Unhoused queer people and those who

directly serve them should be meaningfully engaged in this process. Additionally, we recommend that houseless-services funders like the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) publicly share what organizations they fund and whether those organizations are culturally specific, in order to improve transparency and accountability around equity in contracting.

Develop procedures for sensitively, ethically collecting and acting on sexual-orientation data

The Point-In-Time Count and the Homeless Management Information System should be revised to collect and report data on sexual orientation, in addition to gender identity, so that disparities and barriers related to LGBTQ+ identity can be better understood and addressed.

Factor sexual orientation and gender identity into the VI-SPDAT

We encourage JOHS to continue its ongoing effort to revise the Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT), which is used to “triage” people experiencing houselessness for Multnomah County’s Coordinated Access system, to account for LGBTQAI2S+ identity as a risk factor.

Proactively build the capacity of LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific houseless-services providers

As mapped out in the “Gaps & Assets” section, the LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific houseless-services providers in Portland don’t have enough capacity, collectively, to provide the full range of services necessary. To build these organizations’ capacity, public and private funders should provide financial support and technical assistance in a proactive, low-barrier, collaborative, and consistent manner, for both individual organizations and collaborations among them.

Hold non-LGBTQAI2S+ houseless-services providers responsible for providing LGBTQAI2S+ culturally responsive services

Government agencies that contract with non-LGBTQAI2S+ houseless-services providers—including culturally specific houseless-services providers serving communities of color—should require those providers to demonstrate their ability to deliver programs in an LGBTQAI2S+ culturally responsive manner, including having policies in place for interacting with transgender and gender non-conforming people in a gender-affirming manner. Agencies must enforce these requirements for contracted providers, and should offer training and technical assistance to support providers with compliance.

Increase the number of temporary shelters that are non-binary

The Joint Office of Homeless Services should ensure that multiple temporary shelters distributed across the Portland region are non-binary—i.e., do not restrict eligibility based on sex or gender,

such that non-binary people are ineligible to receive services. We recommend that JOHS achieve this, at least in part, by funding LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific organizations to operate shelters specifically for non-binary, transgender, and other unhoused queer people. JOHS should also ensure that binary shelters are inclusive for transgender people, including in terms of protection for trans people from other shelter clients. Finally, JOHS should ensure that family shelters are open to and inclusive for queer families, including partners who are not legally married and children who are not biologically related to their parent(s).

Increase the amount of recovery housing, other transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing that are LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific

JOHS and other government offices should provide funding to LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific organizations for projects that would help fill the gaps identified in the "Gaps & Assets" section. This includes financial support for:

- Eviction prevention (i.e., emergency rent assistance)
- The purchase/lease, construction/renovation, and maintenance of (and provision of supportive services at):
 - recovery houses and houses for people recently released from incarceration
 - motels converted for medical respite care and transitional shelter

- partially outdoor transitional shelters (e.g., the Queer Affinity Village)
- Regional Long-Term Rent Assistance and housing case-management/navigation staff to support LGBTQAI2S+ people in locating, securing, and retaining housing in the private market

In addition, the Portland Housing Bureau should proactively pair at least one queer culturally specific organization with an affordable-housing developer to apply for the Oregon Supportive Housing Institute, with the goal of developing LGBTQAI2S+ culturally specific permanent supportive housing units.

Continue to expand the City of Portland's LGBTQIA2S+ program into a multi-position, well-resourced team

The City of Portland should implement the LGBTQIA2S+ Report and Strategic Plan proposed by the LGBTQIA2S+ program of the City's Bureau of Equity & Human Rights. The strategic plan recommends the expansion of the program to 6.0 FTE, a size similar to LGBTQAI2S+ programs in cities/counties with similar-sized queer communities (e.g., San Francisco, with its Office of Transgender Initiatives). A more robust City of Portland LGBTQAI2S+ program would have greater capacity to bring a queer equity lens to the Portland Housing Bureau and JOHS.

Deepen stability and strengthen community by promoting cooperative and other forms of homeownership for LGBTQAI2S+ people

In the long term, queer people need more than permanent rental housing; we need to own our own homes. Because queer culture values nontraditional relationships (e.g., “chosen family”), cooperative forms of homeownership, including co-ops and community land trusts, may be good options for our community. Our vision for LGBTQAI2S+ housing stability extends to queer culturally specific or responsive homeownership services, including counseling, education, Individual Development Accounts, and down-payment assistance.

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