

10 Strategies for Creating Inclusive Title X Environments for LGBTQIA+ People

Title X clinics can be an important source of health care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender (LGBTQIA+) people. Many LGBTQIA+ people have experienced discrimination in health care settings or know of someone who has. For these reasons, LGBTQIA+ people may approach health care with the expectation of a negative encounter, or they may avoid accessing care altogether. Creating welcoming, inclusive, and affirming health care environments is therefore critical for increasing access to Title X services for LGBTQIA+ people.



This job aid presents strategies every Title X organization can use to become more affirming and welcoming for LGBTQIA+ clients and staff. These 10 strategies lay the foundation for more comprehensive change efforts.



1. Actively Engage Leadership

Active leadership involvement is essential for building an organization-wide commitment to change. Ideally, at least one person from leadership takes on the role of a “champion,” i.e., a person highly dedicated to LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts and to creating more welcoming environments.

The leadership champion sets the tone by raising awareness and creating “buy-in” among staff. Administering an organization-wide assessment to evaluate current practice and service gaps may help to kick-start efforts. The leadership champion may also set up an LGBTQIA+ task force made up of staff representing different roles and departments. Strategies should be tailored to each environment.



2. Ensure Organizational Policies Protect LGBTQIA+ People

Every organizational policy affects LGBTQIA+ people—so examination of all policies and procedures for LGBTQIA+ protections and inclusiveness is a good start. Non-discrimination policies should protect against discrimination on the basis of *sexual orientation*, *gender identity*, and *gender expression*—and should be posted in high-profile physical and virtual locations, shared during client intake and routine appointment scheduling, when obtaining consent, and when sharing clients’ bill of rights information. This sends a clear signal of what your organization’s commitments and values are. It is equally important to establish a well-defined protocol and process for reporting and responding to any discrimination that may occur.

If your Title X clinic has gender-specific restrooms, you can create welcoming and affirming spaces for transgender and gender-diverse people by developing, posting, and enforcing policies that allow all people to use restrooms that best align with their gender identity.

To affirm LGBTQIA+ people who may have a chosen family of friends who serve as caregivers and supports, organizational policies—including visitation ones—that involve caretakers and support people should use broad definitions, allowing partners, children, and non-relatives to be included when the client wishes them to be.



3. Create and Maintain a Welcoming Physical and Virtual Environment for LGBTQIA+ People

Upon entering a Title X clinic, clients look for signs and clues of diversity and openness to LGBTQIA+ identities. Assess the physical environment of your building with attention to what kind of messages may be communicated to clients. What does the environment say about who your Title X clinic recognizes and serves? Also consider the virtual spaces, such as your website and social media feeds, that your clients visit.

Specific questions you might ask include: Do the images on your health education materials, website, social media accounts, client engagement tools, or marketing products include LGBTQIA+ symbols, a range of gender expressions, same-gender couples, and LGBTQIA+ families? Do you develop health education materials specific to LGBTQIA+ people? Do you offer brochures and other resource materials from local LGBTQIA+ organizations?



4. Ensure Forms Reflect LGBTQIA+ People and Their Relationships

Start with reviewing all your clinic's forms for inclusivity related to relationship-status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. On registration and social history forms, you can reframe marital-status questions as relationship-status questions, and can use gender-inclusive response items such as spouse/partner instead of wife/husband. Ask for names of parent(s)/guardian(s), rather than mother/father.

In medical history forms, avoid specifying sections as applicable to only men or only women. Clients may have different body parts due to surgeries or hormones that may not align with traditional conceptions of female or male. It is better to provide clients with the option to check "not applicable." In addition, sexual history questions should not assume that every sexually-active person requires contraception, or that sex is defined exclusively as penile-vaginal intercourse.





5. Develop and Maintain Partnerships with the LGBTQIA+ Community

Engaging with local LGBTQIA+ community organizations and individuals helps to build awareness of your Title X clinic's commitment to caring for the community. Efforts may include hosting community events in collaboration with local organizations; recognizing LGBTQIA+ awareness days; organizing a group to march in the community's annual Pride parade; inviting diverse LGBTQIA+ people to join your governing or community advisory boards; and getting involved with local issues of importance to the LGBTQIA+ community.

You can assess the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community in your local area by holding focus groups, administering surveys at LGBTQIA+ events, and talking with key LGBTQIA+ stakeholders and community leaders.



6. Ensure All Staff Receive Training on Affirming Communication and Care

To facilitate respectful communication with LGBTQIA+ clients, all staff should receive training on LGBTQIA+ health inequities and affirming communication. Training is essential not only for administrators and clinical services providers, but also for non-clinical staff, especially those who have contact with clients, such as outreach workers, registration and front desk staff, billing and insurance staff, and security personnel. Clinical services providers may also need additional training specific to their practice and the populations they serve.

The National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center (www.LGBTQIAhealtheducation.org) offers free and low-cost online and in-person training with continuing education credit on the full range of LGBTQIA+ health care, including behavioral health, sexual and reproductive health, transgender and gender-diverse clinical care, HIV prevention and treatment, and care specific to children, adolescents, and older adults.





7. Collect and Use Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data to Improve Health Outcomes

Asking about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) enhances client-provider communication and facilitates appropriate screening and counseling. When collected in a standardized way, such as through registration forms and in electronic health records (EHRs), SOGI data allows organizations to monitor the quality of care they are providing to LGBTQIA+ clients.

To promote effective and respectful communication, Title X clinics should also collect information on clients' pronouns and names. Pronouns are the words to use when referring to someone without using their name (e.g., she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs). The name a person uses may differ from the name on their insurance or government-issued documents (e.g., birth certificate, driver's license). It is therefore important for health care staff to learn and consistently use each client's name and pronouns when speaking with or about that client. Names on insurance and medical records should be used for billing and legal purposes only.



8. Ensure All Clients Receive Routine and Inclusive Sexual Health Histories

Taking a routine history of sexual health should be part of the comprehensive history for all adolescent and adult clients. Start the conversation by stating that you ask these questions of all clients in order to provide appropriate care. This opening helps to normalize the conversation. Asking inclusive questions that avoid assumptions—such as “Are you in a relationship?” and “What are the gender or genders of your sexual partners?”—invites clients to feel more comfortable disclosing sexual behavior and any related questions or concerns. The answers to these questions can then guide the clinician to ask about specific sexual activities relevant to pregnancy prevention, and to HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention, screening, and testing. Discussions of sexual health should allow clients to also talk about sexual function, satisfaction, desires, trauma and abuse, and family planning.



9. Ensure Clinical Care & Services Meet LGBTQIA+ Health Care Needs

Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men and transgender women have a higher prevalence of HIV and other STIs. These clients require culturally responsive testing and prevention services according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for special populations. Title X clinics can also offer clients at increased risk of HIV infection access to post- and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PEP and PrEP) to prevent HIV.

Lesbian, bisexual, and other women who have sex with women and transgender men are less likely than heterosexual cisgender women to be screened regularly for cervical cancer, despite equivalent risk. Quality assurance and improvement programs can be developed to ensure these populations receive culturally responsive and trauma-informed cervical cancer screening according to current guidelines for all people who retain a cervix.

LGBTQIA+ clients who are interested in growing their families may need help with exploring options for adoption, fostering, surrogacy, insemination, and fertility preservation. Title X clinics can offer counseling and referrals to agencies to support LGBTQIA+ people interested in becoming parents. They can also connect clients to organizations with resources such as Family Equality (<https://www.familyequality.org>).

Many transgender and gender-diverse clients seek gender-affirming hormone therapy and referral to surgery. Clinical services providers can access training and standard of care protocols for transgender health care from several national and international organizations focused on gender-affirming care, including the Center of Excellence for Transgender Health Primary Care Protocols (transhealth.ucsf.edu).

LGBTQIA+ people have an increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicidality, smoking, and substance use disorders compared to the general population. Title X clinics can offer a range of behavioral health services to meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ clients with mental health and substance use disorders directly or through referral partners. Clinical services providers should be trained to provide affirming treatment based on minority stress principles (i.e., the concept that ongoing stigma-related stress produces negative health outcomes).



10. Recruit and Retain LGBTQIA+ People

Title X clinics can aim to hire clinical services providers who are interested in or are already proficient in LGBTQIA+ health care. This should be done in conjunction with offering access to continuing education and mentorships that focus on LGBTQIA+ care. Title X clinics can also seek to hire a workforce that reflects the diversity of identities within the LGBTQIA+ community.

To achieve a safe and supportive workplace for LGBTQIA+ employees, it is important to implement protocols and programs that promote equity and community. For example, organizations can start an LGBTQIA+ employee affinity group; expand benefits to unmarried partners and chosen families; develop administrative guidelines to support employees who are going through the process of gender affirmation; and ensure that employee health insurance plans cover gender-affirming treatments.

// Conclusion

Organizational changes—both big and small—can go a long way towards overcoming barriers that prevent LGBTQIA+ clients and their families from accessing acceptable high-quality Title X services. These strategies will help guide you in your efforts to provide welcoming, inclusive, and affirming care and services to LGBTQIA+ people in your community. For further reading, we encourage you to visit the [National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center](#).

// Acknowledgments

The RHNTC would like to thank the [National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center](#), a program of the [Fenway Institute](#), for supporting this adaptation of “[Ten Strategies for Creating Inclusive Health Care Environments for LGBTQIA+ People](#),” published in April 2021.