



Expanding ID Card Access for LGBT Homeless Youth

By Hannah Hussey October 2015

Introduction and summary

Research suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, youth are significantly overrepresented among young people experiencing homelessness.¹ Like other homeless individuals, LGBT young people experience significant challenges while homeless—including limited access to food, shelter, health care, education, and employment. Many of these young people have run away from home or have been kicked out by families who do not accept them for who they are. Regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, homeless youth—like other adolescents and young adults—are growing and developing a sense of self, while also navigating homelessness. For LGBT young people, this often includes making difficult choices about whether and when to identify openly as LGBT.

At the same time that they are figuring out how to express who they are to themselves and to others in person, many homeless LGBT youth struggle to prove their identities on paper. State-issued photo identification, or ID, cards are, for a variety of reasons, difficult to obtain for many LGBT and homeless youth. Without an accurate, up-to-date ID card, even routine tasks can become bureaucratic nightmares.

Federal regulations that govern certain state processes for issuing federally accepted ID cards make obtaining these cards more difficult for homeless individuals. In addition to these federal barriers, individual state policies create unnecessary hurdles for homeless young people trying to acquire identification:

- Only 22 percent of states—including the District of Columbia—offer free or reduced-cost ID cards to young people who are homeless.²
- Nearly half of all states require some form of consent from a parent or legal guardian to issue an ID card.³
- 12 states have no apparent protocols for assisting homeless ID card applicants, and many states have protocols that are unclear or impractical.⁴
- At least 15 states require proof of sex reassignment surgery, a court order, and/or an amended birth certificate for transgender individuals to change the gender marker on their ID card, with additional states using policies that are unclear or otherwise restrictive.⁵

Finding services, housing, and employment requires navigating a variety of different systems that can be challenging for many people and even more difficult for homeless LGBT youth. Using complicated processes to obtain required documentation such as ID cards places an unfair burden on these young people. To ensure that homeless youth are not deterred from reaching their goals because of bureaucratic red tape, it is critical to implement measures that facilitate their access to ID cards, including:

- **Revise state policies to facilitate access to ID cards for LGBT homeless youth.** Relatively simple changes to state policy and practice—such as establishing clear procedures for homeless applicants, implementing free or reduced-cost ID cards, lowering or eliminating parental consent requirements, accepting a broad range of identity documents, and updating policies on gender markers—would create a more user-friendly application process for homeless youth, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Improve ID card access for youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and the criminal justice system.** Helping young people at risk of homelessness obtain an ID card while they are still in systems of state care would remove some of the obstacles they encounter when leaving state care and ensure that ID card access is not a barrier to housing stability.
- **Create or leverage partnerships with the nonprofit community.** By improving coordination, building relationships, and partnering on special events or initiatives with community-based organizations, state ID agencies can tap into pre-existing networks of resources already serving homeless LGBT youth.
- **Establish municipal ID card programs.** Municipalities can act independently of state and federal requirements to establish ID card programs that benefit homeless youth, LGBT individuals, and a wide range of other communities that have low rates of ID card ownership.

Making changes at state ID agencies may not solve the structural barriers to stable housing that exist for LGBT youth. Moving young people off the streets requires a larger investment of resources into housing and shelter programs and related services, as well as further exploration of homelessness prevention initiatives. Low-barrier service models—which may involve not asking for ID cards at all—also merit additional attention. In the meantime, however, reducing the barriers to obtaining ID cards is critical to helping homeless young people access the same opportunities as their peers. If improving the lives of homeless and unstably housed youth is a community responsibility, then ID cards offer ID agencies the opportunity to do their part.

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