

For Caseworkers: Supporting Transgender Youth in Michigan's Foster Care System: Key Challenges and Implications for Social Work Practice

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Stand with Trans Volunteer

Transgender youth in the foster care system face a distinct set of challenges that caseworkers and foster care parents should be aware of as they aim to foster affirming and safe environments for transgender youth. While not unique to Michigan, transgender youth in Michigan face systemic challenges such as access to services and the attitudes of guardians, caseworkers, and peers that can significantly impact their ability to function in daily life. Recognizing these realities is a critical step toward improving outcomes for transgender and gender-diverse youth.

One of the most significant issues is overrepresentation and pathways into care. Transgender youth, inclining LGBTQ+ youth, are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. While many transgender youth enter foster care due to common reasons (e.g., abuse, neglect) a substantial number become involved in the system because of family rejection tied directly to their gender identity. In fact, research indicates that a large percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in state custody report being removed, running away, or being forced out of their homes for reasons related to their identity. For caseworkers, this context matters. These youth may arrive in care already carrying trauma linked not only to instability, but also to rejection of a core aspect of who they are. That experience often shapes how they interact with caregivers, services, and authority figures.

Once in the system, placement instability and inappropriate settings present another major challenge. Studies show that gender diverse and sexual minoritized youth

experience more frequent placement changes than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. For transgender youth, instability is often compounded by placements that do not affirm their gender identity. This can include being placed in group homes or congregate care settings where staff or policies fail to respect their identity, or being assigned to housing that conflicts with their gender. These situations are not just uncomfortable; they can be harmful. When youth are repeatedly moved or placed in environments where they feel unsafe or invalidated, it becomes significantly harder to achieve permanency. Stability is closely tied to emotional well-being, educational continuity, and long-term outcomes, so disruptions in placement can have lasting effects.

Access to gender-affirming medical care is another area where transgender youth in foster care often face barriers. Major medical organizations recognize gender-affirming care as evidence-based and medically necessary for many individuals. However, youth in foster care do not always have timely or consistent access to these services. In some cases, bureaucratic hurdles, lack of knowledgeable providers, or uncertainty about consent can delay care. Even when services are technically available, long wait times can prevent youth from receiving treatment when it is most needed. Furthermore, given the current federal administration, access to gender affirming hormone therapy has become even more restricted for all transgender youth, but especially those in the foster care system. For transgender youth, delays in

gender-affirming care can exacerbate gender dysphoria and negatively affect mental health. Caseworkers play an important role in navigating these systems, advocating for timely services, and ensuring that medical decisions are guided by established standards of care.

Equally concerning are the discrimination, harassment, and safety risks that transgender youth may encounter while in care. Reports consistently show that these youth are at higher risk of mistreatment from peers, caregivers, and even staff within the system. This can include verbal harassment, misgendering, exclusion, or, in more severe cases, physical harm or exploitation. Structural gaps in oversight and accountability can make it difficult to fully protect transgender youth from these risks. LGBTQ+ youth from these risks. When adults in the system fail to affirm a young person's identity, it can undermine trust and create environments where youth feel unsafe or unwelcome.

For caseworkers in Michigan, these challenges highlight the importance of adopting an informed, proactive approach. Supporting transgender youth requires more than meeting basic placement needs; it involves creating affirming environments where youth can feel seen, respected, and safe. This includes carefully vetting placements to ensure they support gender

diverse identities, minimizing unnecessary placement changes, and intervening quickly when issues arise. It also means advocating for access to appropriate medical and mental health services and working collaboratively with providers who are knowledgeable about gender-affirming care.

Equally important is ongoing education and self-awareness. Caseworkers can benefit from being prepared to recognize not only when others are acting from bias, but when they are as well, which can be mitigated through continued education. Simple actions, such as consistently using a youth's chosen name and pronouns, can have a meaningful impact. At a systems level, agencies benefit from clear policies, staff training, and accountability mechanisms that prioritize the safety and well-being of transgender and LGBTQ+ youth.

Ultimately, transgender youth in foster care are navigating not only the challenges of the child welfare system but also the complexities of developing their identity in environments that are not always supportive. Caseworkers are in a unique position to influence their experiences for the better. By understanding the barriers transgender youth face and responding with informed, affirming practices, professionals can help create pathways toward stability, permanency, and well-being.