

**I don't
want
to leave
part of
myself at
the door.**



Positive Spaces Initiative
Starter Kit

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Commit to making your agency a Positive Space.

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning (LGBTQ+) newcomers are an integral, though often invisible, part of immigrant, refugee and LGBTQ+ communities. Experiencing marginalization from within cultural communities and mainstream LGBTQ+ communities often leaves individuals feeling that there are few options for obtaining services. Recognizing that good practices already exist in the sector, The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) developed the Positive Spaces Initiative (PSI) with the aim to share resources and increase our organizational capacity to more effectively serve LGBTQ+ newcomers.

In the context of the settlement sector, a Positive Space is a welcoming environment where LGBTQ+ newcomers are able to access culturally inclusive services with dignity and respect and service providers can work free from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Everyone can work to create Positive Spaces by challenging homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism.

The contents of this starter kit were identified and created through regional consultations with OCASI members and LGBTQ+ communities. We heard that while people working in settlement services were aware of LGBTQ+ resources external to the sector, they wanted resources made specifically for our sector. Many agencies were candid with us, sharing that their starting point was getting to know the basic issues and ideas, such as terms and

definitions. Others articulated a desire to better understand the settlement experiences of LGBTQ+ newcomers through a human dimension. As such, this kit is comprised of two main components: five fact sheets and five stories drawn from interviews* with LGBTQ+ newcomers, staff and allies who participated in the Untold Stories Project (for more information on Untold Stories go to page 17).

This starter kit is part of a larger campaign intended to bring greater visibility to the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ newcomers and staff. No one should have to leave a part of themselves at the door when they are accessing service or coming to work each day. Our sector is extraordinarily rich in our diversity; this includes sexual orientation and expressions of gender identity. We are committed

Welcome!

to creating spaces which are holistic and inclusive of our diverse identities and experiences. We hope that you and your agency will take part. Please visit: www.positivespaces.ca.

Learning about issues related to LGBTQ+ newcomers is an ongoing process. There are people in the sector who have been working on and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights for many years, while for some, this is an entirely new area. We hope these fact sheets and stories provide a basis of discussion within and between staff, volunteers, newcomers, friends, families, spiritual leaders and community leaders to help create safer spaces — Positive Spaces — for LGBTQ+ people throughout the settlement sector in Ontario.

*Names and identifying features of the interviewees have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The photographs are not necessarily the people in the portraits.

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Action Positive VIH/SIDA
Centretown Community Health Centre
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London InterCommunity Health Centre
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Settlement & Integration Services Organization (SISO)
The 519 Church Street Community Centre – Trans Programs
Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA)
Welcome Centre Immigrant Services
Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre

We also thank the OCASI Board of Directors and dedicated staff team for your guidance and leadership. To the insightful LGBTQ+ newcomers and committed service providers: your involvement, support and willingness to share your experiences are invaluable. Thank you!

Thank you to Citizenship and Immigration Canada for their contribution to this initiative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Debbie Douglas', with a stylized, flowing script.

Debbie Douglas
Executive Director
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

Just the Basics: Tips for Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Client

“What makes me feel comfortable is for no one to be interested in my preferences or my private life...to be able to express myself, and say, ‘I’m gay,’ but without that side effect of people saying, ‘Oh, he’s gay.’”

— John

Be Supportive.

Maintain an open mind. Ask yourself what your own assumptions are about sexuality and gender, and how your personal beliefs and values have contributed to these assumptions.

Listen.

Be appreciative of the courage and strength it may have taken that person to tell you they are LGBTQ+.

Do Your Own Research.

Ask your clients what they think they need from you and how you can help. Be prepared to learn about these issues on your own. Do not expect your client to educate you about everything related to LGBTQ+ newcomer issues. For example, getting more information about the laws surrounding sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the client’s home country can provide information about those attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people which may have impacted your client’s experiences.

Give appropriate referrals.

If you don’t know where to refer, find the information you need. A place to start is at a local agency that offers support and referrals to LGBTQ+ people and their families or at www.positivespaces.ca. Gather information about changing personal identification documents, sponsoring same-sex spouses and referrals for survivors of trauma and torture due to homophobic and transphobic violence.

Respect confidentiality and safety needs.

LGBTQ+ newcomers come to Canada with distinct strengths and needs. Provide support in a way that respects the need for safety. Sexual orientation and/or gender identity may or may not be disclosed to family and friends. Do not ‘out’ clients by telling friends, family or community members about their situation. Stigma can be significant in communities and people might fear bringing ‘shame’ to one’s family due to homophobia and transphobia. It can be a challenge for LGBTQ+ newcomers to find a balance between remaining connected to culture and family and seeking out appropriate LGBTQ+ referrals and information.

Support your client to know their rights.

Share information that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is illegal. Share information that no one can be discriminated against for their association with someone who is LGBTQ+-identified.

Just the Basics: Tips for Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Client

“If the climate is not open and the settlement worker is not feeling safe, then how would they be able to respond appropriately and effectively, and create a safe and nurturing environment for GLBT newcomers. If the settlement worker who is GLBT identified is not able to be open about their identity, it’s a huge compromise on their own personal identity and their ability to serve.”

— Ahimsa

In Your Workplace:

Create a recognizably welcoming environment. Display rainbow flags and stickers in your office environment. If you do not have the support of your colleagues to do so, display them in your own workspace. LGBTQ+ people look for identifying inclusive symbols when making choices about settlement services.

Use inclusive language. Think about the language and terms we use everyday to discuss gender, marital status, family structure, etc. One example is to use the term ‘partner,’ which can refer to someone of any gender. If you ask a person about their ‘partner’ instead of asking ‘if they have a husband’ you may leave more options for that person to share the reality of their family structure and home life.

Another example is to learn from other agencies how they have changed their intake forms to include ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ in addition to male and female. Change terms in your own agency’s materials to be more inclusive if they are not inclusive yet.

Report incidences of homophobic and transphobic violence. Find out how to do this on the fact sheet entitled “Tips and Tools.”

Work to learn more about homophobia and transphobia. Ask for training for yourself and others in your agency. Call LGBTQ+ agencies or programs and ask for information about their services. There is not a lot of research on LGBTQ+ newcomers in Canada, but there is some. Look for recent research, visit the websites on the fact sheet titled “Want to learn more?” and share it with your colleagues. Challenge yourself to learn about these issues even if it may be uncomfortable.

Glossary of Terms

Lesbian:

Women who are attracted to or who have loving romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women. Some women may use the term 'Gay' or 'Queer' to describe themselves.

Gay:

Someone who is attracted to and/or has loving, romantic and/or sexual relationships primarily or exclusively with members of the same sex. In some contexts this term is used to refer only to men. Some may also use the term 'Queer' to describe themselves.

Bisexual:

Someone who is attracted to and/or has loving romantic and/or sexual relationships with men and women.

Transgender:

Transgender is an umbrella term which includes all people who do not identify with the gender they were labelled with at birth.

Transsexual:

A transsexual is a person who lives full-time in the gender with which they identify, rather than the gender assigned at birth. Living full-time in one's chosen gender may include initiating hormones, surgeries, changing one's name, etc.

Queer:

Historically this has been a negative term for homosexuality and gender variance. More recently, the term has been

reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ movement to refer to itself. The definition of queer continues to be debated among communities, activists and queer theorists.

Questioning:

A term often used to describe someone who is exploring their sexual or gender identity. A person may question their sexual orientation or gender identity at any point in their life.

LGBTQ+:

An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning. Often the acronym is used as an umbrella term within communities. Some people use longer versions of this acronym as a way to work towards inclusion. For example, in some contexts LGBTTIQQ2S stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, questioning and 2-Spirit.

Intersex:

A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person may at birth appear physically female on the outside, but have typically male anatomy internally.

Two-Spirit:

A term used by some First Nations and Métis people to describe from a cultural perspective people who are known in mainstream as LGBTQ+.

The primary objective of this Glossary of Terms is to raise awareness amongst settlement service agencies regarding the relevant terms related to working with LGBTQ+ newcomers.

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather an introduction to key concepts.

For more information, please access the full Glossary of Terms at www.PositiveSpaces.ca under Find Resources Tool Kit

Glossary of Terms

“Trans and homo, it’s not the same. There is a homo trans, like I could be a gay trans man, attracted to a man. And there is a trans man who is straight, like me. So it’s not right to mix homo and trans. Not all the trans are homo.”

— Omar

Sexual Orientation:

An innately-felt sexual or romantic attraction, either primarily or exclusively, toward members of a particular sex or gender identity. Examples include **gay**, **lesbian**, **bisexual**, **heterosexual**, **pansexual**, and **asexual**.

Gender Identity:

One’s innate sense, understanding, and experience of one’s own gender, whether it be femaleness, maleness, a mix of the two, or something else entirely. Gender identity does not necessarily have anything to do with physical sex characteristics. **Trans**, **bi-gender**, **hijra**, **muxe**, **sworn virgin**, **third gender**, and sometimes **two-spirit** are all terms related to gender identity.

Gender Expression:

How one conveys gender, typically through appearance, dress, mannerisms, etc. Gender expression is read based on cultural norms, and varies in different places and contexts.

Lesbian:

A female (anyone who identifies as female) who is sexually or romantically attracted, either primarily or exclusively, to other females.

Gay:

A male (anyone who identifies as male) who is sexually or romantically attracted, either primarily or exclusively, to other

males. Other LGBTQ+ people, such as lesbians, may also self-identify as gay. Gay has historically been used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people in general.

Bisexual:

A person who is sexually or romantically attracted to two genders (for example, to both women and men). A bisexual person may or may not experience equal levels of attraction to both genders, and this attraction (like any sexuality) can be fluid over time. A related term is **pansexual**, which refers to a person who is sexually or romantically attracted to three or more genders.

Trans:

A person who self-identifies with a gender other than the one assigned at birth. This is both an abbreviation / umbrella term (for **transgender**, **transsexual**, **trans man**, **trans woman**) and a stand-alone term.

Two-Spirit:

This is an umbrella term that seeks to encompass a wide variety of sexually and gender diverse identity concepts from numerous North American Indigenous cultures and languages. The word “two-spirit” is derived from the concept of having both a male and a female spirit. Many of the cultures traditionally recognized the existence of a third gender, and/or conceptualized gender in a way that is completely different from dominant Euro-North American society. In many Indigenous cultures, two-spirit people have historically been

valued and revered for their unique gifts, and have held special roles in the community, including social, religious, and ceremonial duties. Some sexually and gender diverse Indigenous people may prefer to identify with a specific concept within their own culture and language, rather than by the umbrella term “two-spirit.”

Queer:

Historically used as a pejorative term, queer has largely been reclaimed as an umbrella term or self-identification by and for people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. It is a popular option for self-identification because its meaning is not fixed or specific, thus one is not required to fit one’s identity into a pre-determined box. Keep in mind that some people may still take offence to the term, however, so use it with caution. As always, ask people how they self-identify and use whatever term is preferred by the person in question.

Questioning:

A state of questioning, exploring, or being unsure about one’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Intersex:

This is an umbrella term for a variety of conditions that a person can be born with, involving a sexual or reproductive anatomy that society has trouble labeling as either definitively male or definitively female. A person labeled with an intersex condition has a combination of sex characteristics (for example

external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or chromosomes), some of which are typically labelled as female, some of which are typically labelled as male, and/or some of which appear to be somewhere in between. This was previously known as “hermaphrodite;” however, the term “hermaphrodite” is considered offensive and should not be applied to humans.

Asexual:

A person who does not typically feel a notable amount of sexual attraction toward any person, regardless of sex or gender identity. Asexual people may still feel romantic attraction toward individuals of one or more genders, often identify with a particular **romantic orientation**, and often do form intimate emotional partnerships. Asexuality itself is a spectrum. Those who experience a very minimal amount of sexual attraction, or only under very specific circumstances, may identify as **demisexual** or **greysexual**.

Genderqueer:

This is often used as an umbrella term for people whose gender identities are not cisgender (for example, transgender, bi-gender, third gender, etc.). This is also a popular option for self-identification because it exists outside of a binary understanding of maleness and femaleness, and its meaning is not fixed or specific.

LGBTQ+:

This is an abbreviated acronym that refers to the entire spectrum of gender (beyond cisgender) and sexuality (beyond heterosexual). L = Lesbian, G = Gay, B = Bisexual, T = Trans / Transgender / Transsexual / Two-Spirit, Q = Queer / Questioning, + = Asexual / Intersex / Pansexual / etc. The acronym is sometimes written in the longer form of “LBGT2S1QQA” or similar, but even the longer forms cannot list every possible identity, which is why the + is important.

Transition:

The process that a trans / transgender / transsexual person may go through to bring their gender expression (and sometimes their physical body, and sometimes their legal status) in line with their gender identity. One’s transition may include coming out to increasingly more people, changing how one dresses, adopting a new walk and mannerisms, developing a higher or lower voice, changing one’s name, changing one’s sex designation on legal documents, changing one’s physical body through medical interventions (including hormones and surgery), or all or none of these. The process of transition is self-defined and varies widely from person to person.

Coming Out:

The process of revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to other people. Prior to this happening, people are often presumed to be heterosexual and cisgender. Coming out can be a lifelong process, and many LGBTQ+ people are out to some people and not out to others. Nobody should ever be "outed" without their consent, as this is a breach of confidentiality and can put the person at serious risk of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Gender Binary:

This refers to the concept that there are only two genders (male and female), and that they are rigidly fixed categories which are inherently opposite of one another. Other examples of binaries include black/white, night/day, and good/bad. A binary understanding of gender is problematic because it denies the identities, experiences, and realities of people who do not fit neatly into either of those boxes. Many people prefer to conceptualize gender as a spectrum, while other people reject the entire concept of gender.

Homophobia:

Hatred, fear, intolerance, disapproval, or disgust toward gays and lesbians. Homophobia is dangerous because it frequently leads to discrimination and violence against people who are, or are perceived to be, homosexual. Homophobia is frequently used as an umbrella term to

include biphobia, transphobia, and attitudes leading to the oppression of LGBTQ+ people in general. Homophobia can be both individual and systemic, and it is practiced by various institutions in society.

Biphobia:

Hatred, fear, intolerance, disapproval, or disgust toward bisexual people. Biphobia is dangerous because it frequently leads to discrimination and violence against people who are, or are perceived to be, bisexual. Biphobia can be both individual and systemic, it can come from LGBTQ+ communities just as much as from heterosexual cisgender communities, and it is practiced by various institutions in society.

Transphobia:

Hatred, fear, intolerance, disapproval, or disgust toward trans people. Transphobia is dangerous because it frequently leads to discrimination and violence against people who are, or are perceived to be, trans. Transphobia can be both individual and systemic, and it is practiced by various institutions in society.

Cisgender:

Self-identification with the gender assigned to one at birth (for example, a person born with a body labeled female who identifies as a woman, or a person born with a body labeled male who identifies as a man).

Ally:

A person who supports and celebrates sexual and gender diversity, who confronts homo/bi/transphobia, and who works for the inclusion and equal rights of LGBTQ+ people, without necessarily identifying as LGBTQ+ themselves.

Note:

Please note that all of these terms are subjective, and are rooted in social, historical, and political contexts. Every culture and every language has its own terms and meanings. Please also note that all sexualities and gender identities can be fluid and may change over the course of a person's life. Never assume to know how a person self-identifies – if you are not sure what term or pronoun a person prefers, just ask!

Know Your

Rights!

Protecting

LGBTQ+

people in

Ontario

*“Where you feel respected,
you feel your views are
valued, that you’re able to
challenge authority, and to
say, ‘This is not right,’ and
you’re heard.”*

— Melissa

The Ontario Human Rights Code protects LGBTQ+ people from discrimination on the basis of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity and gender expression.”

What does this mean?

It means that if you are LGBTQ+, the Ontario Human Rights Code has specific laws to protect you. Employers, landlords, and service providers are not allowed to discriminate against you on the basis of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Ontario Human Rights Legal Support Centre

www.hrlsc.on.ca

Toll Free: 1-866-625-5179 or TTY Toll Free: 1-866-612-8627

Ontario Human Rights Commission

www.ohrc.on.ca/en/code_grounds/sexual_orientation

www.ohrc.on.ca/en/code_grounds/gender_identity

Health

A doctor or health care professional cannot refuse treatment because of your sexual orientation, gender identity or if you are living with HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is considered a disability, and the Human Rights Code has protection for people with disabilities.

If you feel you have been discriminated against by a doctor based on your sexual orientation or gender identity you can contact:

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario

www.cpsso.on.ca/contactus

Toll Free: 1-800-268-7096 Ext. 603.

You can find doctors who are sensitive to LGBTQ+ issues by asking at your community health centre or asking at a settlement agency.

There is also general information on finding a doctor in Ontario at this website: <http://settlement.org/site/HE>

Housing

A landlord cannot discriminate against you because you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans. A landlord cannot, for example, refuse to rent you an apartment because you are gay. A landlord may not harass you in your building or place of residence. For more information about finding housing or reporting discrimination you can go to these websites:

Settlement in Ontario: <http://settlement.org/site/HO>

New Youth in Ontario: www.newyouth.ca/life/housing

www.positivespaces.ca

Know Your Rights! Protecting LGBTQ+ people in Ontario

Employment

An employer cannot discriminate against you because of your sexual orientation. For example, being denied promotions, training or being fired.

Workers Action Centre: www.workersactioncentre.org

Hate Crimes, Violence and Discrimination

‘Hate Crime’ is a legal term which describes criminal acts that are motivated by prejudice or ‘hate.’ If you experience a hate crime, violence or discrimination based on your sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, you can report it.

If you want to report an incident of violence, below are some reporting lines in Ontario. This is not a complete list; find additional resources and use them in your agency.

In an emergency, call 911.

Province Wide (call from anywhere in Ontario):

LGBT Youth Line (4pm-9:30pm)
1-800-268-9688 (outside Toronto)
416-962-9688 (within Toronto)

Crime Stoppers
1-800-222-8477

London:

Anti-Hate and Bias Reporting Helpline
519-951-1584

Peel:

LGBT Hate Crimes Hotline
905-456-5905

Toronto:

The 519 Anti-Violence Programme
416-392-6877 or avp@the519.org
Violence reporting line, assistance with police reports, court support, legal/medical referrals, counselling, criminal injury compensation applications, victim impact statements, self defence.

Tips and Tools: How to make your agency a Positive Space

“I don’t disclose my sexuality when I see people from my culture. There are open-minded people from my culture, but you don’t know. When I see religious people, I don’t want to talk about my sexuality, because I know what I will get. Even if they don’t say anything, just how they look at you, just the body language, it’s not nice. I can’t argue with every homophobic person that I see, try to teach them, to educate them. I can’t do that.”

— Andrew

Environment

Display rainbow flags or posters within your agency. Many LGBTQ+ newcomers will recognize this as an agency effort to be inclusive. Displaying these items will also signify to other service agencies that they can refer their LGBTQ+ clients to you. If you have questions from clients about why you have chosen to display rainbow symbols you can use those questions as an opportunity to explain your commitment to providing open, accessible services to all newcomers.

Display materials from LGBTQ+ inclusive organizations and agencies. Having these materials displayed will demonstrate your commitment to providing a Positive Space. It will allow and empower any newcomers who may not disclose information related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression to access the information themselves. To ensure safety and confidentiality, it is helpful to have information available about LGBTQ+ resources both in your town or city as well as in a neighbouring area, town or city. LGBTQ+ newcomers may choose to call or visit neighbouring communities in order to maintain confidentiality.

Communication

Use inclusive language. For example, change your intake forms to ask, “Do you have a partner or are you dating?” in addition to

asking if the person has a spouse.

Be aware of the ‘coming out’ process. Understand that the coming out process will impact how and what clients disclose about their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

Have a non-judgemental communication style. Be aware that for those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, they may have many unanswered questions and not know where to find needed information.

Approach intake questions in a sensitive way which allows for disclosure of sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression. For example, don’t assume that an individual will immediately disclose their experience of violence or trauma due to transphobia. Asking questions in a sensitive way will help build trust in your interactions.

Attitude and Behaviours

Challenge homophobia and transphobia in your agency. Speak up in your agency meetings. If you are not sure how to act or what to do, find the information you need and take action. Challenging homophobia and transphobia may at times require that individual staff and volunteers challenge their own beliefs and values.

Commit to making change within your agency. Strive to meet your mandate to provide accessible services. Ask yourself how you

Tips and Tools: How to make your agency a Positive Space

personally are working to provide accessible services for everyone.

Avoid making assumptions about whether or not an individual is 'out.' Many individuals negotiate who they are and are not out to on a daily basis. Friends, family and community members may or may not know. It is a person's right to negotiate their individual safety.

Adhere to your agency confidentiality guidelines. Ensure that you do not discuss personal information about a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. It is not appropriate to decide for another person what they should disclose to others.

Policies and Procedures

Educate staff and volunteers by providing necessary training. In addition to general diversity or anti-oppression training, learn the complexity of issues impacting LGBTQ+ populations by attending focused trainings. There are trainings and resources available in Ontario. To start, you can link to www.positivespaces.ca.

Educate your clients and service users. Homophobia and transphobia affects everyone. You can educate people by displaying materials from LGBTQ+ agencies and by ensuring that the agency board, staff and volunteers are comfortable to challenge homophobia and transphobia.

Ask questions to assess whether or

not you have begun to make your agency a Positive Space:

- Do you have referral information to LGBTQ+ health, social and legal services?
- Do you have LGBTQ+-specific programming for newcomers?
- Do you know if there is a 'coming out' group or LGBTQ+ social group in your community? Does that group have information about the settlement process?
- Do you have information about laws pertaining to gender expression, gender identity or same-sex attractions and relationships in countries around the world? Does your agency engage in dialogue about how social attitudes from home countries affect the settlement process for LGBTQ+ newcomers?
- Do you have information on sponsoring same-sex spouses?
- Do you have information and referrals on how to transition, such as access to hormones and sex reassignment surgeries?
- Do you have information on how a client can change their personal identification documents to correspond to their gender?
- Do you provide information for newcomers on how to gain volunteer experience within the LGBTQ+ community or with a local LGBTQ+ program?
- Do you have general knowledge about the mental health issues impacting LGBTQ+ people?
- Do you have an anti-oppression or anti-discrimination policy which includes gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation?
- Do you have LGBTQ+ volunteers, staff and board members?

Want to
Learn more?
Resources

*“This list is meant only as
an introduction.*

*To access more resources,
including links to agencies
all over Ontario, please visit
[www.PositiveSpaces.ca/
Find-Resources.](http://www.PositiveSpaces.ca/Find-Resources)”*

Organizations and Networks

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission

www.iglhrc.org

International LGBTQ+ human rights organization. Resources include research and country-specific information on LGBTQ+ issues.

Intersex Society of North America

www.insa.org

Organization dedicated to ending stigma about intersexuality. Resources include a list of support groups and a teaching kit.

Lesbian and Gay Immigration Taskforce

www.legit.ca

Resources and information on immigrating to Canada for same-sex couples.

PFLAG Canada (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

www.pflagcanada.ca

Organization providing support and education to LGBTQ+ people, their friends and families. Find your local chapter and peruse extensive resources.

Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO)

www.rainbowhealthontario.ca

A provincial program working to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ people. Site includes searchable databases of trainers, training resources, researchers and research.

LGBTQ+ Parenting Network

www.LGBTQ+parentingconnection.ca

A network providing support and resources for LGBTQ+ families. Resources on a range of topics from starting families to family life.

Transexual Road Map

www.tsroadmap.com

Written from a transsexual person’s perspective, this site is a guide through the various stages of the transitioning process.

Triangle School for LGBTQ+ youth

<http://schools.tdsb.on.ca/triangle/program.html>

The Triangle Program is Canada’s only high school program for LGBTQ+ youth.

Supporting Our Youth (SOY)

www.soytoronto.org/links.html

Organization offering programs for LGBTQ+ youth. Extensive resources including a list of LGBTQ+ positive religious, spiritual and cultural groups.

519 Church Street Community Centre

Want to Learn more? Resources

www.the519.org

Toronto-based community centre offering many programs for LGBTQ+ communities and their families, including a peer support group for LGBTQ+ newcomers.

Downloadable Resource Packages

Asking the right questions 2

www.camh.net/Publications/Resources_for_Professionals/ARQ2

A manual for counsellors working with LGBTQ+ clients. Produced by Centre for Addition and Mental Health (CAMH).

LGBTQ+ Immigrant Exclusion: An Introduction

http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/islandora/search/mods_identifier_path_ms:dissertations~slsh-107

This research report outlines the case for providing LGBTQ+ services for newcomers in mainstream and culturally specific settlement agencies.

Pathways to Gender Justice

www.ccrweb.ca/Gender.pdf

Toolkit integrating a gender analysis for the immigrant and refugee serving sector. Produced by The Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR).

Youth Migration Project

www.actoronto.org/research.nsf/pages/youthmigration

Six fact sheets created from a research study on HIV vulnerability and the health and social service needs of migrant LGBT and Two-Spirited youth.

The Untold Stories Project was a research component of The Positive Spaces Initiative. One of the most common misconceptions we heard during our consultations was that LGBTQ+ newcomers do not exist, so there is no need for LGBTQ+-specific settlement services. From others, we were told there is little understanding about how settlement issues are experienced differently by LGBTQ+ newcomers. Finally, we heard that queer colleagues working in the settlement sector do not feel safe or fully supported in their workplaces.

It was in this context that the need for this research emerged. Hoping to break these myths and misunderstandings, we conducted 25 interviews with LGBTQ+ newcomers, service providers and allies across Ontario. People ranged in age from 16–60 and were from Africa, the Caribbean, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia. Nineteen newcomers and six service providers were interviewed. LGBTQ+ newcomers and staff do exist, and their stories have guided this project.

The quotes throughout this kit and the five stories that follow have been drawn from these interviews. They were selected because they highlight many key themes that emerged across all the interviews: feeling isolated, shame and pride around being LGBTQ+, the importance of peer support, the complexity*

of being out to one's different communities, racism, violence, finding good legal advice, problems with personal identification documents when transitioning, language and the importance of creating safer spaces through programming, policies and interactions between staff, volunteers and service users.

We hope these stories will be used to generate both informal conversations and illuminate the issues in more formalized contexts for the development of training materials, programming and organizational policies and procedures.

We are deeply grateful to all the people who shared their stories — their strengths, their hopes and the injustices they have experienced. We are also grateful to the people who did not participate for various reasons but who continue to create their own stories living their lives as LGBTQ+ newcomers, service providers and allies.

Please meet Paulette, Norman & G, Nouri, Nico & Johan, and Billi...

** Names and identifying features of the interviewees have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The photographs are not necessarily the people in the portraits.*

Untold Stories



Paulette

“I count my blessings and I keep it moving,” Paulette says of her experience as a refugee claimant so far. Since coming to Canada from East Africa eight months ago, Paulette has drawn on her inner strengths to keep moving forward while navigating the immigration system and making a home for herself here.

Paulette did her homework before coming to Canada, and tried to be realistic about what to expect. Initially, Paulette felt a



tremendous sense of relief to be in a country with rights for LGBTQ+ people: “The minute I touched ground over here, it was like this thousand ton weight was lifted off my chest, and I felt so much release from all the pressure that I’d been feeling, tossing and turning and dealing with my emotions about being a queer individual.”

Her journey has not been without its particular complexities, though. Amidst the many challenges of the settlement process – feeling isolated, adapting to cold winters and finding community – Paulette recalls how even a basic need like securing housing was very difficult in the beginning. Her first

landlord was an elderly man who commonly rented to immigrant women. After living there for a short while, he told her that he expected his tenants to entertain him in the evenings. Paulette found this inappropriate and offensive so she packed her things and left. But she chose not to file a complaint against the landlord because she did not want to draw attention to herself while awaiting the decision on her claim: “As a refugee claimant, and a queer one, you really want to pick and choose your battles wisely...It has a really bad feeling. It sits in your stomach. And you’re like, hmm, maybe next time. But this time I’m just going to let it ride.”

While Paulette was able to find new housing with the help of a LGBTQ+ support worker, she wonders about other women in the same vulnerable situation who do not have the resources to leave. Being part of a group for LGBTQ+ newcomers has been incredibly important for Paulette. Not only has it provided useful information and resources along the way, but it has also given her a sense of family, when she is so far away from the family she grew up with.

Paulette shares how feeling connected to other queer immigrants and having a supportive facilitator has helped during an immigration process that is often impersonal: “They make you feel like you’re a human being, and your life is worth something. Whereas going through the process, dealing with the machine, you

tend to question your value as a human being, because you’re not viewed as, ‘hey, I’m so-and-so,’ you’re viewed as, ‘hey, oh the refugee clinic.’”

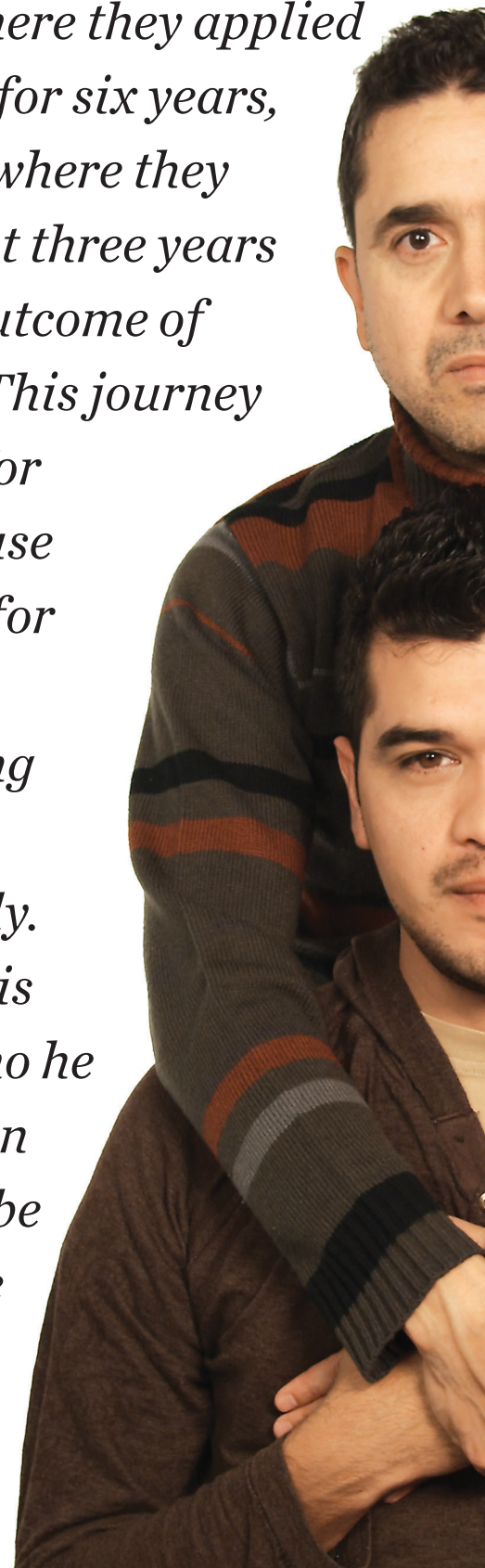
Paulette has also had to confront Western ideas about what a queer person should be like, a demand that feels unreasonable when she has had to conceal her sexuality for most of her life: “A lot of us spent so much time hiding our sexuality where we came from, so to come out and all of a sudden flip the switch...It’s like, ‘oh, we don’t see you acting like this, you’re not the typical...’ I mean, what is the typical queer person?”

Proving persecution based on sexual orientation is not only stressful but has real life consequences. With that in mind, Paulette chooses to be open about her sexuality when she deals with immigration officials and settlement agencies, recognizing that it was this openness that drew her to Canada in the first place. As she puts it, “This burden is now my freedom.”

Reflecting on her life, home has been many different places for Paulette – she was born in one, grew up in another and has learned from all these different cultures. Coming to Canada has been a continuation of this personal journey: “It was about coming into my own and coming out to myself, in the open. I found that refreshing...You just go through it and you think about all the things you’ve been through and you’re like, wow, this is another step forward, wow, this is another step forward.”

Norman & G

Norman and G have been fighting for their rights as a gay couple for nine years. It is a fight that has taken them from Honduras, their home country, to the United States, where they applied for asylum and lived for six years, and now to Canada, where they have lived for the past three years while awaiting the outcome of their refugee claim. This journey has been important for Norman and G because after being partners for 13 years, they finally feel comfortable living together, openly, as a couple and as a family. Norman feels that this has helped him be who he truly is: "Ten to fifteen years ago, I couldn't be myself. I couldn't live the way I can now live. One day, I



just met this guy, G, and I just fall in love. And we decide to move out of our country because people there hurt us so much.”

Both men were accomplished professionals in their home country: Norman was a pharmacist and G was an engineer. Initially, they applied for political asylum in the United States because same sex relationships are not recognized there. Instead, their lawyer suggested that they should marry women to make them seem more credible to immigration. While very hesitant to make an untruthful claim, Norman and G did as they were advised. Not only were they both denied refugee status in the

US despite getting married, but G was threatened with deportation.

Both Norman and G knew they could not return to Honduras where they felt they would never be able to live freely. A friend suggested Canada might be a more welcoming society for refugees and gay people, so Norman and G decided to pursue making a refugee claim here. They felt tremendous relief arriving in Canada after so many years feeling threatened by police and state violence in both Honduras and the US. Knowing that their rights are protected here helped them feel safe as they dealt with immigration for the first time. G recalls: “I was crying in that moment because it made me feel very happy and very emotional. Because Norman and me, we can speak about us together.”

They now live in Hamilton, Ontario where they spend their days volunteering, going to school and working towards having their professional credentials recognized. Even though they were licensed professionals in Honduras and went through a recertification process in the United States, Canada recognizes neither. They dream of the day they can work as professionals again. Going back to school has been a mixed experience. Norman found himself with a homophobic classmate and a teacher who did little to intervene. G, on the other hand, decided to come out to his class one day. He said to them: “I’m going to tell you the truth. I am not here under the political refugee. I am here because I am gay. And I live with my partner.” He asked that they keep his story confidential, but

felt it was important to share his experience — some of his classmates have now met Norman, and he feels good about his decision to be open about his life.

Norman and G have a strong sense of community. Through their volunteer work in a senior’s centre, they have learned about the resources available here — something they would have found useful when they first arrived in Canada: “We have found many resources. We know we are going to suffer discrimination because homophobia is everywhere around the world and in all the levels. We know where to call. We know who we could speak with.” (G). They also appreciate spending time with other queer newcomers: “Because you can talk, and can relate to stories, and everything that happened to you. And you don’t feel that judgment because people are simply like you.” (Norman).

For Norman and G, being in a country where they believe their rights are protected helps them feel safe despite the homophobia that is often part of their life. Although G still has nightmares about his experiences, and would like to talk with a queer counsellor to help him heal these traumas, he appreciates that he and Norman can live together as a common law couple and be open about their relationship. While Norman and G wait for a decision about their refugee claim, G is writing a book about their story. He is still waiting for its conclusion, and is hopeful that Canada will give it to him.

Nouri

“It was very hard, because we thought I was the only one here, and then after a while, we recognized that we are not alone... It was a relief.”

Since meeting a community of transgendered people in Ottawa, Nouri feels happier than when she first arrived in Canada from South Asia with her family several years ago. Nouri is 21 years old and she spends her time taking English classes — two a day — and going to arts programs for trans newcomers at a local community centre. She has found it helpful to have





somewhere to share the worries that she is facing, and especially likes being able to get together with other trans people to talk about challenges like finding employment. Most important, though, are the friendships that

Nouri has made at the school

she attends with her older sister: “Now I am very happy. We have a lot of friends there, and we are going, talking to them. And when I am absent, they are missing us.”

While friends have provided a sense of community, Nouri also has a number of different service providers in her life who

support her and her family — a settlement worker, a translator, her teacher from the job skills training program and the doctor at the community health centre. Granaz, her teacher, has been especially helpful. Not only has she been discreet and confidential about Nouri’s gender identity, making her feel comfortable in class, but she has also helped to have her name changed from her legal male name to her chosen name, Nouri, on documents used at the agency.

Nouri also hopes to eventually change her name legally. Having a male name on government documents while living as a woman has created confusion in some situations, as well as discrimination when looking for a job: “For now it’s a problem because I am one person, and my name is another person. I was applying for some job, and I didn’t get it, because my real name is another, and they found out I have two names. This is our problem now but maybe, after the surgery, I hope to be done everything.” Another time, when Granaz was away, the substitute teacher read Nouri’s male name off the class list during roll call and caused her tremendous embarrassment and distress.

Sometimes helping Nouri negotiate negative attitudes about trans identity has its own negative consequences. For example,

even Granaz, who Nouri likes so much, advised her to pretend that she only speaks English with people from her home country so that she won’t have to answer personal questions. While intended to maintain her privacy, this also means that Nouri is cut off from her community: “We were embarrassed sometimes. It’s hard for us to talk to people because everything was in change, and we didn’t know how to explain to them. In this way we keep a little bit separate.” At the same time, Nouri feels hopeful about her and her family’s life here. She finds strength in her faith — “It’s all coming from Allah. Allah helped us to come here and now I can change my gender, and this is our best wishes here.” — and with her English steadily improving and a good group of friends, Nouri’s next project is to take sewing classes to learn to make clothes!

Nico

& Johan

When Nico and Johan first saw one another at school, they immediately recognized that they were both from the same home country in Asia. Now living with their families in Barrie, Ontario, they have become good friends during the short time they have known each other. This is partly because they are close in age and partly because they have both been in Canada for just a short time (less than a year). Most of all, though, it is because their experiences as gay teenagers back home and now here in Canada have been quite similar.



Nico and Johan felt very comfortable with each other right away, but making other friends has been much more difficult. The few other Asian people at their high school were born in Canada, so they feel like they don't have much in common with them. And

although they miss their friends back home and want to make new friends here, it feels like it is taking a long time. Nico says: "I tell myself, just wait, just wait for friends. Two months [passed], I give myself [an] extension and then it doesn't really [do] anything."

Sometimes, other youth from school seem to want to talk and maybe even make friends, but after asking Nico about his back-ground and how he came to Canada, they stop talking to him and just leave. Nico finds this confusing: "In your own country, if you talk to somebody, it's easy to become friends, to communicate. You can express what you're feeling because you know the system there, what people say."

Making new friends in a new country and a different culture has been hard because they don't feel confident speaking English yet: "Because it's English, you don't know a lot of words, like when it's deeper English, maybe they taunt us, and then we don't know what that means." (Nico). Most of all, they are frightened to truly be themselves and worry that if they tell other people that they are gay, they will not be accepted: "We're shy, we're nervous a lot, and to be gay. We're new in school and if the teachers know and our classmates know..." (Nico) "They judge us, they will make fun of us." (Johan) "And maybe they'll leave us, so we don't have any friends." (Nico). In contrast, they both had many friends back home and felt well-liked. Because they generally understood what people thought there, and what was accepted, they also felt more able to be open about their sexuality: "Back home, if they know we're gay they don't care, 'you're my friend, we love you.'" (Johan).

Nico and Johan do not only worry about homophobic attitudes being directed towards themselves, they also worry that their parents will be affected. Both families

immigrated to Canada because it was hoped that there would be better opportunities here, and they are acutely aware of how hard their parents are working to give them a better life. Nico and Johan have both told their mothers that they are gay (although their fathers do not know), and they feel that their mothers are very supportive. Yet to protect their parents, they are very private about their sexuality: "Here, you are scared if anybody sees you. And then tell that to your Mom. Because they're working hard just to take care of you." (Nico).

Sometimes, they go to a newcomer youth group, which they enjoy. It feels good to talk with other people about their shared experiences as immigrants — at the same time, though, most of the conversations assume that all the youth there are straight, and neither Nico nor Johan think they will ever feel comfortable saying anything about being gay.

At this point, so soon after moving to Canada, Nico and Johan have trouble even imagining what a safe space might be like for queer immigrant youth. But they do know what safety, comfort and community felt like back home: knowing their neighbours, feeling accepted by their friends, being in a place where people say hello to one another on the street, speaking the language with ease and living amongst their sisters, nieces, cousins and other relatives. Perhaps most importantly, they felt sure that the people around them would accept them, and love them, for who they were regardless of their sexuality.

Billi

For almost 40 years, Billi has been dedicated to “the business of helping people.” A parent and a poet, Billi also works as a senior manager at a community organization in a small town north of Toronto that provides settlement services. Although Billi is heterosexual and is not aware of any LGBTQ+ newcomers who have accessed services at her agency, she has taken an interest in learning more about the issues



involved, and hopes to support change within her workplace to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ staff and clients.



Billi imagines the complexity and vulnerability of even beginning to access service as a gay man, when assumptions about sexual orientation are so common: “How difficult it would be to go to any ordinary settlement agency and say, ‘Ok, I want to sponsor my partner.’ So then they’re going to say, ‘Ok, so, what’s your wife’s name?’ Automatically assuming...and if this settlement worker is hearing, and that settlement worker is hearing, and it’s in the open

cubicle, are we providing a safe space for the person to say, ‘By the way, no, I’m a gay man’?”

For Billi, it is neither possible nor desirable to ask that an employee separate the various aspects of who they are and leave a part of themselves at home each day when coming to work. Instead, given the diversity of people and experiences that make up our communities, she believes that organizational change through flexible policies and practices is needed to better support LGBTQ+ staff: “If we have rigid policies, then they’re not client-centered or worker-centered. They are agency-centered policies and procedures.”

But change happens slowly, and in her experience, it can be met with resistance. Billi recalls hearing about a staff and management team at another social service agency who wanted LGBTQ+ diversity training. Ultimately, the board of directors denied the request because they were concerned about how the agency would be perceived if they worked on LGBTQ+ issues. In other situations, Billi has observed that the ways diversity training is delivered can be inadequate. She notes that while some senior staff might believe that a short, one-time training session is enough, in reality, it is often not sufficient.

Furthermore, the emphasis for learning about diversity is often placed upon frontline staff: “My recommendation is that senior management, and the board level, also need to become sensitive and caring.”

There are serious consequences associated with lack of training and education — many service providers are ill-informed about LGBTQ+ issues and stereotypes persist: “People are not knowledgeable. They have preconceived ideas, [and] there are some myths floating around that the majority of people in this community have HIV, those kinds of things.” In small towns like the one Billi lives in, insufficient services for LGBTQ+ newcomers is also a problem. As a result, many people end up accessing services in Toronto — an unsatisfactory solution given the distance people must travel. In the future, she hopes to see more research into the issues and some focussed LGBTQ+ programming where people can share experiences over a meal and feel a greater sense of community. After all, LGBTQ+ newcomers want to participate in community life much like anyone else, Billi believes: “They bring the same strengths anybody would bring. In terms of their education, their abilities, their aspirations, their dreams. They would want to contribute to the society. They would want to participate in civic responsibilities. They would want to participate in the community’s well-being.”



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