

Pride Place

Claiborne Mason Warner and Ted Lewis column: A solution to end LGBTQ+ young adult homelessness

By Claiborne Mason Warner and Ted Lewis Jun 1, 2020 11

A solution to end LGBTQ+ Young Adult Homelessness

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The reality of LGBTQ+ young adult homelessness doesn't always align with the public's perception. For many of these marginalized young people – who often become homeless due to an untenable family situation – homeless means having no place to go except for a friend or relative's couch or spare mattress. While these temporary stays provide a short-term respite, eventually, these vulnerable young people end up where they began: back out on the street.

We know LGBTQ+ youth disproportionately face homelessness. According to national statistics, 40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ+. Yet LGBTQ+ youth only account for 9% of the youth population.

As the only organization in Central Virginia directly addressing the unique needs and the healthy social development of LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, Side by Side is all too familiar with the challenges of homelessness. Staff receive calls, texts and social media messages regularly from youth confronting housing instability.

A new partnership between Virginia Home for Boys and Girls and Side by Side is helping to promote stability and give more LGBTQ+ young people a place to call home. The two nonprofits are launching Pride Place at VHBG to provide safe, transitional housing at no cost for LGBTQ+ young adults between the ages of 18-25 who have nowhere else to go.

VHBG — like Side by Side — is dedicated to supporting youth in crisis. Founded in 1846, VHBG continues to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of the community. The nonprofit focuses on transitional living services, specialized education and therapeutic resources for youth with emotional and behavioral health concerns. VHBG's trauma-informed approach is infused into its existing Independent Living program that serves as the foundation for Pride Place.

While the new partnership was planned well before the current COVID-19 pandemic, Pride Place's launch comes at a critical time for LGBTQ+ young adults.

From our experience, family conflict is the most common cause of all youth homelessness. For LGBTQ+ young people in particular, the conflict tends to be over their sexual orientation or gender identity and the current social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines can exacerbate these disagreements. For young adults that haven't come out to their families, the ability to hide your true self becomes more difficult. While we've heard from many families who have been supportive of their child coming out, young adults have started reaching out for help after receiving negative reactions from caregivers.

In addition, LGBTQ+ people are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 according to research by the Human Rights Foundation. LGBTQ+ people particularly LGBTQ+ young adults, are overrepresented in the restaurant and food industry, which has been devastated by the pandemic. The economic disparity brought on by the pandemic will likely intensify housing struggles for LGBTQ+ young adults.

At no cost to the participant, Pride Place is designed to provide emergency transitional support and help give young adults the skills and resources they need to secure permanent housing. Side by Side offers the case management, intake and overall support for LGBTQ+ young adults while VHBG provides the physical space, emergency response and opportunities for learning life skills. Clients are also paired with Peer Navigators through a partnership with the Nationz Foundation, another community organization that serves LGBTQ+ populations in our region. Since Pride Place will be located in two of VHBG's brick homes that offer private bedrooms, residents can practice social distancing to ensure safety for themselves, staff and volunteers.

Pride Place extends the impact of Side by Side's Host Home program which launched last year. Working with trained and vetted volunteers, Side by Side connects young people experiencing homelessness with stable, safe, affirming housing. When Side by Side staff saw a critical need for additional options for LGBTQ+ housing options to supplement the Host Home program, VHBG stepped up to make it happen.

Pride Place is opening its doors to young people with Pride Month as its backdrop. The timing is significant. While the month is often used to celebrate diversity and equality, we should also use this time to highlight the struggles and discrimination many in the LGBTQ+ community continue to face, especially people of color and transgender individuals. Pride Place is helping our region get one step closer to a more equitable future for everyone – but it will take more hard conversations, action and partnerships for equality to continue moving forward.

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