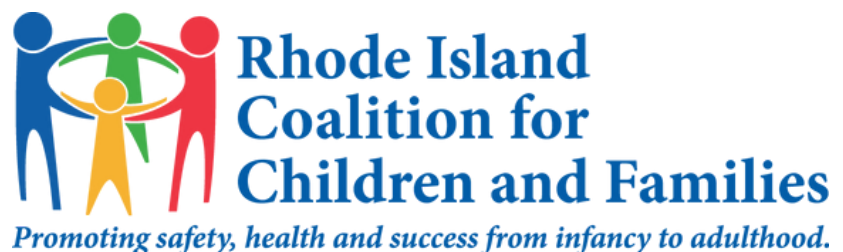


LIFTING UP LGBTQIA+ Youth & Families

March 3, 2025

Symposium Summary Report



Context

In recent months, our nation has seen a dramatic erosion in protections for LGBTQIA+ youth. Political actions are undermining community efforts to create safe and welcoming programs and spaces that are centered around the needs of youth. These range from attempts to dismantle anti-discrimination policies in education and healthcare, to granting federally funded programs the right to discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Together, these actions are assaulting the very humanity of some of our most vulnerable young people.



For LGBTQIA+ youth, the consequences of this wave of hostility and disenfranchisement are devastating. Studies show that these young people, especially those who are transgender or gender non-conforming, are already at a higher risk of facing mental health challenges, bullying, and homelessness compared to their peers.

In response, the Children's League of Massachusetts and Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families together hosted a day-long symposium to bring together national, state, and community leaders who are committed to upholding the dignity, safety, and well-being of young people. The symposium gave our members and partners space to gather collective knowledge and power, to review and recommend policy and practice solutions, and to reaffirm our collective commitment to standing up for LGBTQIA+ youth and their families.

Throughout the symposium, we heard two consistent sentiments: gratitude for creating safe space for these conversations, and a commitment to hold on to our collective values and stand up for young people.

Participants reaffirmed their willingness to have the "courageous conversations" needed at this time and to push back on ignorance and hate that threaten to harm the children in our care and in our communities.

We are thankful to have a joint community of advocates, community-based providers, state agency leads, and policymakers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island – including many who bring their personal experience to their work every day – who are steadfast champions for equity and partners in defending the well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Rachel Gwaltney

Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

Tanja Kubas-Meyer

Executive Director
Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families

National Perspectives

Panelists

Polly Crozier, GLAD
Harper Seldin, ACLU
Janson Wu, The Trevor Project



"Gallup poll shows 23% of Gen Z identify as LGBTQ+. This community consists of average people in all fifty states. The takedown of good information and resources on federal websites opens up an opportunity for our organizations to share that information." – Polly Crozier

"You may have partners who aren't aligned in LGBTQ+ priorities, but are aligned in child well-being, so find the common ground there to solve problems." – Janson Wu

"We need to depoliticize LGBTQ+ folks' identities. We should not feed into the polarization and politicization coming from the executive office." – Janson Wu

"...The legal and federal action interact with the material world that trans youth are living in. Schools have been positive places for trans youth to be affirmed [in Rhode Island], and we are fighting to keep it that way." – Harper Seldin

These panelists shared updates from the national landscape and thoughts about how local and state advocates can best engage in protecting LGBTQIA+ youth on the ground.

Updates & Guidance

Depoliticize LGBTQIA+ identity and humanity. Do not allow the polarizing language and action from a loud minority distract from the fact that nearly 1 in every 10 Americans identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community (Gallup) and the work to support this community is widely popular. A person's identity should be nonpartisan.

Partnership is critical. This includes people who are themselves at risk or being harmed, the wider network of youth-serving organizations, and related fields that care about youth. Foster a nonjudgmental space for conversation, find a way to align with partners and organizations on common goals. It is possible to find areas of agreement in unexpected places.

Many executive orders and new policies are intended to intimidate and scare organizations away from doing the right thing. We can rely on state law for some protections, including right to privacy and some nondiscrimination laws.

Communities and organizations must reaffirm their commitment to equity for historically marginalized youth as a core value or operating principle.

State Perspectives

Panelists

Representatives from Rhode Island and
Massachusetts state agencies
Offices of the Child Advocate
State legislators

These panelists shared updates
and guidance from their
respective states.

Updates & Guidance

Massachusetts and Rhode Island leaders reaffirmed the commitment to stand our ground on our values, to use data to drive policymaking that supports LGBTQIA+ youth, to continually assess risks, and to maintain the mindset that preventative services are the most effective and efficient way to protect children from deeper systems involvement. Our two states continue set the example for progressive policies that continue to protect the rights of marginalized communities.

- Ability to legally change one's name with ease
- Protecting from harmful gender conversion therapy
- Nondiscrimination laws that explicitly protect transgender people

Agency and legislative leaders both stressed the need to be strategic in our collaboration across youth-serving systems to ensure alignment and continuity of care for LGBTQIA+ youth, especially for mental and behavioral health. Schools play a vital role and must be safe and inclusive spaces for kids, and we have to be explicit about the need to protect LGBTQIA+ youth.

State legislators emphasized the need for community advocates to be vocal partners in determining how to continue uplifting and advancing the needs of LGBTQIA+ youth. They recognized that proposed federal budget cuts will affect people who are at the greatest risk for negative outcomes.

Some recent policies and guidance from the states include:

- DCYF strategic plan for 2025–2030 (RI)
- DCF LGBTQIA+ Nondiscrimination Policy (MA)
- Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students (MA)
- Guidance for Rhode Island students (GLAD)
- Coverage for gender-affirming care (MassHealth)
- Guidance preserving DEIA policies and practice in K-12 schools and Institutions of Higher Education (MA and RI Attorneys General)
- Guidance on Accessing Your Right to Gender-Affirming Care (MA Attorney General)



We cannot approach this work from a scarcity or zero-sum mindset. Investments that protect LGBTQIA+ youth and families help all families who are in need of children's behavioral health services or who are at risk of child welfare system involvement. Disinvestment in vulnerable children has ripple effects on the social safety net and juvenile justice system that cost us more in the long term.

Lived Experience Panel

Panelists

Community providers and state policy professionals with lived experience as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and some with history in foster care

These panelists shared stories that shaped their advocacy journeys. They also shared strategies for youth-serving organizations to consider when lifting up LGBTQIA+ youth

Stories & Strategies

The keyword for this panel was resilience. Speakers reflected on their personal journeys and how passionate self-advocacy, faith, allyship, chosen and extended family, self-care, and growing into mentorship and advocacy roles have all helped foster their own resilience.

The group spoke about the fear and doubt felt by LGBTQIA+ youth even in better times. Today they are feeling fear not only for their own rights and safety but for friends who are immigrants or threatened in other ways by new federal policies; policies that are sometimes echoed by their own family members. They need caring adults to be steadfast and vocal about their support for all young people.

More emerging adults and young professionals with lived experience are becoming active as advocates for not only LGBTQIA+ rights but for the wraparound supports that youth in foster care need to successfully transition to adulthood, including housing, healthcare, and education.

Recommendations for policy change from the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth



"Nobody gave me this resilience, I just built it from my experience in foster care and homelessness. Combined with my resilient birth mother and my faith and spirituality, that is how I have stayed resilient." – Christian Miller

"I was told I wasn't in the system long enough to earn tuition assistance from the state. I was able to claim independence and earn my degree for an affordable amount. Now Rhode Island College has a system to give foster care youth more access to education than I had, which is great." – Jackie Carroll

"Affordable housing is an issue in Massachusetts. Youth end up back in shelters and it is especially difficult for LGBTQ+ youth who end up in shelters without positive, affirming policies [in those shelters]." – Rayna Hill

Small Group Sessions

Overview

In a round-table style, youth service providers had a chance to share resources, concerns, and victories of their work supporting LGBTQIA+ families, and their personal experiences as members and as allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. Providers brainstormed action steps to continue their good work to support LGBTQIA+ youth and ways to stay connected with each other as a supportive community.



Takeaways

Organizations need to support their staff as much as the people they serve. Affinity groups within organizations help staff connect personally with one another and feel like the workplace is supportive.

When staff may come with different political backgrounds or beliefs about LGBTQIA+ youth, recentring conversation on organization mission and the need to care for youth as individuals helps organizations bridge these differences.

We can find ways to reframe state budget priorities to stop cuts to line items that seem small but make a significant impact for vulnerable youth and families.

We can emphasize the economic benefits of youth-serving organizations that provide shelter, meals, and upstream care. The intersectionality between the lack of affordable housing and queer youth homelessness who may find shelter in spaces that are unsafe is present and a top concern for youth with lived experience in the LGBTQIA+ community.

It is more important now than ever to remain in coalition with organizations that share common goals to lift each other up, communicate relevant resources, and celebrate joy in the community.

“We’re spending more money filling a motel [as temporary shelter], rather than building an apartment complex for those folks.”

– Youth Serving Organization

“There are non-discrimination laws that really matter, until someone [my supervisor] tells me I can’t do something then I’m going to continue to do it”

– Youth Serving Organization

Taking Action

We are fortunate to have a network of institutions that stand as a bulwark against federal attacks, providing support, protection, and hope for those who need it most.

Champion the Cause

State and local guidance serves as a point of clarity and commitment to equity for families and service providers in our communities, in the face of discriminatory directives from the federal government. The repeated message for organizations that are looking for what to do next is clear: continue to do the necessary work that you've been doing regardless of the federal smoke and mirrors. Youth- and family-serving organizations are collecting data and creating fact sheets to demonstrate their effectiveness to lawmakers. The Massachusetts and Rhode Island Legislatures have coalitions advocating for increased investment in family resource centers, foster care providers, and cash assistance programs to support the Commonwealth's most vulnerable families.



Continue the Work

A clear message from the day was: We will not comply with baseless and harmful directives until compelled by law. By continuing to link the work of child welfare organizations do with achieving equitable outcomes for marginalized communities, service-providing organizations demonstrate their value to their community and to legislators. Service providing organizations should stay true to their missions and goals with their staff to center the people working towards creating a more equitable and just community. Several organizations in attendance shared they are opening shelters and other services for the LGBTQIA+ youth community. Organizations expressed support for creating internal affinity groups for marginalized staff and clients along with hiring folks with lived experience in the child welfare system and/or as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Increasing representation is a data-driven method of improving outcomes for our states' most vulnerable communities.

Resources

Resources for continued support, information, and action

Presenters shared the following resources for providers, advocates, and the general public to learn more and take action.

This QR code has information shared throughout the day from our federal and state partners and from our service-providing organizations and coalitions. The Link Tree contains several guides for those seeking to be effective allies for the LGBTQIA+ community.



Visit the symposium host organizations for more information about our work

www.childrensleague.org

www.riccf.org

Supporters & Sponsors

Thank you to our Symposium Planning Committee!

Tanja Kubas-Meyer

Rachel Gwaltney

Sasha Aaronson

Darlene Allen

Mia Alvarado

Kari Beserra

Marc Cote

Kayla David

Quinten Foster

Tammy Mello

Sandra Pyram-Loyer

Thank you to our sponsors!

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Agenda

LIFTING UP LGBTQIA+ Youth & Families



A POLICY & PRACTICE SYMPOSIUM

MARCH 3, 2025

Higgins University Center
Tilton Hall, Clark University
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610

8:30 AM BREAKFAST AND SIGN-IN (*continental breakfast provided*)

9:00 AM OPENING WELCOMES AND SYMPOSIUM FRAMING

OPENING: Kayla David, *Vice President, Home Division, Family Service of RI* and Tammy Mello, *President & CEO, Key Program*

WELCOME: State Senator Robyn Kennedy (*Worcester 1st*)

FRAMING OF THE DAY: Kayla David and Tammy Mello

SPONSOR REMARKS: Lori Sustek, *Managing Director, Youth Villages*

INTRODUCTION TO DAVID CICILLINE: Brian F. X. Sullivan, *Treasurer, RI Coalition for Children and Families*

REMARKS: David Cicilline, *President & CEO, Rhode Island Foundation*

9:30 AM PANEL DISCUSSION: National Perspectives

MODERATOR: Keith Tavares, *Rhode Island Foundation Director, Capacity Building*

PANELISTS: Polly Crozier, *Director of Family Advocacy, GLBTQ Advocates & Defenders (GLAD)*; Harper Seldin, *Director of LGBTQ & HIV Project, ACLU* and Janson Wu, *Vice President of Advocacy & Government Affairs, the Trevor Project*

11:00 AM BREAK

11:15 AM PANEL DISCUSSION: State Perspectives

MODERATOR: Scott Knox, *The Boston Foundation*

PANELISTS – MASSACHUSETTS: Ruben Ferreira, *Deputy Commissioner for Quality Improvement, DCF*; Robbie Goldstein, *Commissioner, DPH*; State Senator Robyn Kennedy (*Worcester 1st*); State Representative Jack Lewis (*7th Middlesex*) and Maria Mossaides, *Director, Office of the Child Advocate*

PANELISTS – RHODE ISLAND: Ashley Deckert, *Director, DCYF*; Kara A. Foley, *Education and Information Coordinator, Office of the Child Advocate* and Ana P. Novais, *Assistant Secretary, RI Executive Officer of Health & Human Services*

12:15 PM LUNCH (*box lunch provided*)

12:45 PM RECONVENE & REFLECT

1:00 PM LIVED EXPERIENCE PANEL

MODERATOR: Quinten Foster, *Director of Transgender Whole Healthcare, EBCAP*

PANELISTS: Jackie Carroll, *Training Coordinator, Leadership RI*; Rayna Hill, *Legislative & Policy Manager, MA Commission on LGBTQ Youth* and Christian J. Miller, *Chief Implementation Aide, DCYF*

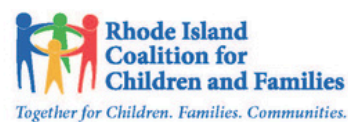
2:00 PM PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE/BREAKOUT DISCUSSION GROUPS

MODERATORS: Darlene Allen, *CEO & Executive Director, Adoption RI*; Mia Alvarado, *Executive Director, Roxbury YouthWorks*; Mark Cote, *VP, Community Care Alliance*; Quinten Foster and Tammy Mello

3:30 PM CLOSING: What are our collective next steps?

Darlene Allen and Craig Gordon, *President & CEO, Communities for People*

4:15 PM ADJOURN



COMMENTARY

Despite efforts to dismantle protections for LGBTQIA+ youth, we can't afford to lose the progress we've made

If we are serious about preventing abuse, we must invest in strong violence prevention and anti-discrimination efforts, write advocates for children and families

By **Rachel Gwaltney and Tanja Kubas-Meyer** Updated June 3, 2025, 5:55 a.m.



A progress pride flag during the Drag March LA protest in West Hollywood, Calif., in 2023. ERIC THAYER/BLOOMBERG

The Children's League of Massachusetts and Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families (RICCF) believes that every child and young person deserves to be nurtured, accepted, and protected, especially those who face additional risks due to [discrimination or rejection](#).

Our states have a history of uplifting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) communities. Despite representing a small percentage of the general population, LGBTQIA+ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system and are more likely to [experience psychological, physical, and sexual abuse](#).

Transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming youth, in particular, face higher rates of familial rejection, abuse, and systemic barriers to safety and well-being.

It is [deeply concerning](#) that current federal policies [aim to dismantle](#) anti-discrimination policies that provide protections to LGBTQIA+ youth. Whether eliminating gender and sexual identity markers other than male/female through executive order, or allowing discrimination in education, health care, etc., these actions are creating a hostile environment for LGBTQIA+ youth and their families. This is an assault on the basic humanity and dignity of our LGBTQIA+ communities and puts vulnerable youth and families at greater risk.

Young people discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity are simply learning who they are— just like all youth do — and deserve our love and support, not suspicion or stigma. LGBTQIA+ young people who reported living in very accepting communities attempted suicide at less than half the rate of those who reported living in very unaccepting communities. The data is clear: this increased risk is not because of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. It's because LGBTQ+ youth often face mistreatment, stigma, and discrimination in their daily lives.

For LGBTQIA+ youth, the consequences are devastating. LGBTQ+ young people are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide compared to their peers, according to [The Trevor Project](#). Their 2024 national survey found that 39 percent of LGBTQ+ youth

seriously considered suicide, including about half of all transgender and non-binary young people. Discriminatory actions don't just set policy; they send a message that LGBTQIA+ youth are less deserving of protection and care.

The [Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families](#), in partnership with the [Children's League of Massachusetts](#), recently co-hosted *Lifting Up LGBTQIA+ Youth & Families — A Policy and Practice Symposium*. This event brought together a strong array of advocates, policymakers, and experts from across New England to share information and strategies for supporting LGBTQIA+ youth in our work.

At the symposium, participants heard about the work happening at the state and local levels to protect youth and families at risk. We discussed the effect of state policies that affirm access to gender-affirming care, provide critical mental health support, and create safe housing for LGBTQIA+ youth. Most importantly, we heard the call from members of the [LGBTQIA+ community](#) for support and action that prioritizes their safety and well-being.

Families thrive when children are accepted for who they are and supported by their families and caregivers and young people do best when they are supported and surrounded with care. If we are serious about preventing abuse and discrimination, then we must invest in the essential supports that all children and families need: safe housing, affirming health care, access to quality education, economic security, and strong violence prevention and anti-discrimination efforts.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island have long been leaders in advancing equality and inclusivity for LGBTQIA+ individuals and both of our organizations uphold these values and commitment. We must not let our progress be undone.

Rachel Gwaltney is executive director of the Children's League of Massachusetts and Tanja Kubas-Meyer is the executive director of the Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families.
