



National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



Making Shelters Safe for Transgender Evacuees

Transgender people identify as or express a gender that is different from their sex at birth. This includes people who are born male but live as female, or vice versa, and also people who are androgynous. All transgender people are at significant risk of harassment and physical or sexual assault by people who do not understand, are fearful of, or do not approve of transgender people.

Evacuation shelters must be safe places for transgender evacuees because, like other evacuees, they have nowhere else to go. They may also experience unique difficulties in this time of crisis. It is not difficult to ensure safe shelter for transgender people. Here are some guidelines:

Respect a person's self-identification as male or female. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, if someone identifies herself as a woman, she should be treated as a woman in all circumstances, regardless of whether she was born male and regardless of whether she has had sex reassignment surgery. A person's stated identity should be recognized and respected, and shelter staff/volunteers should use the name and pronoun ("he" or "she") that the person prefers. If you don't know what terms to use, ask politely.

Understand that people may not have updated identification. Evacuees who fled their homes in crisis may not have identification that correctly identifies their gender or the name they use. The gender and name a person provides should be respected and used, regardless of the name and gender listed on their documents.

Respect a person's evaluation of what housing options are safe or unsafe for that person. Transgender people should be allowed to choose the housing option that they believe is the most safe for them. Generally, if shelters are sex-segregated, people who identify as men should be housed with men, and people who identify as women should be housed with women. This is true regardless of whether people have ID showing this name/gender, regardless of whether they look masculine or feminine, and regardless of whether they've had sex reassignment surgery. However, a person's own evaluation of his or her safety should always be respected. For example, transgender men (born female) may feel safer housed with women. Shelters should also offer transgender residents the ability to sleep within eyesight/earshot of the night staff to lower the risk of assault and harassment.

Respond to inappropriate behavior or harassment by any person. Harassment of any person, including a transgender person, should not be tolerated. Don't base policies or rules on untrue stereotypes about transgender people. It is not fair or correct to assume that just because a person is transgender or has male genitals they are a physical threat to others. Enforce/make rules based only on inappropriate behaviors.

Ensure safe bathroom and shower options. Transgender people should be welcome to use bathrooms and showers that correspond to their self-identified gender or the facilities that feel safest for them. It is rarely illegal for people to use the bathroom that corresponds to the gender they identify as. And, in many places, it may be illegal to deny them access to the bathroom that corresponds to the gender they identify as. Other people's discomfort is not a valid reason to deny a transgender person access to facilities. If possible, gender-neutral bathrooms should be made available. It may be necessary to add a stall door or shower curtain to address valid privacy and safety concerns.

Understand that transgender people may not "look like" the people they feel they are. Evacuees are generally without their personal toiletries, clothing, make-up, shaving supplies and all of the other items they typically use to groom. For example, a transgender woman (born male) may be unable to shave facial hair without her toiletries. This does not mean she should be treated with disrespect or not seen as a woman.

Keep a person's transgender status confidential, unless he or she tells you otherwise. This minimizes the risk of discrimination and violence. Transgender status is personal health information that is no one's business.

Additional Help and Resources

For additional assistance with providing safe shelters, contact one of the **Lambda Legal National Help Desks in Dallas at (214) 219-8585 or in Atlanta at (404) 897-1880**. They can help with legal issues, provide information about local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community centers that can help LGBT evacuees, and provide information relating to hormones and other prescription drugs including HIV/AIDS medication. For a more complete publication devoted to making all shelters safe for transgender people, see *Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People* at <http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/TransHomeless.pdf>.