

Disparities in GLBT Mental Health

Workshop presentation from the NAMI 2007 Convention in San Diego, CA

June 22, 2007

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Well, first of all, my name is Renae Sewell, and I am the programs director in Baltimore, Maryland, for a non-profit organization by the name of Hearts & Ears, and we are a drop-in center. We are a resource organization that gears to the GLBTQ, and we are open 3 days a week, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

We have numerous programs there. We have a support group. We have a Dual Recovery Anonymous Group. We do a lot of socializing.

We celebrated Pride this last weekend, and it went off without a hitch. We got a lot of response.

You know, I was listening to Mark, and I couldn't touch any of that or whatever Alicia is getting ready to say. When they asked me to come here to do this, I said, "Oh, my God. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to write. I don't know what to do," because this is the first time I have ever been a director of a program. This is the first time I have ever been to San Diego, a lovely place.

But the GLBT issues, they wanted me to compile some information on disparities, and so this is what I wrote:

All right, you all. The barriers to successful mental health treatment, these are the barriers from within the GLBTQ mental health consumer as well as barriers established by the mental health and social systems set up to provide services to them, not understanding what it means to be GLBT in the first place. Provide us therapists, doctors not listening or taking the time to understand, being judgmental, lack of case management services that understand GLBTQ issues, growing up not understanding why you feel the way you do along with all the other problems in the household; for example, feeling like you want to have dolls when you have trucks or vice versa.

Your parents or whomever the guardian is doesn't understand, and you are punished for your feelings, made to do it their way or being laughed at for not fitting in.

When you enter a room, you can feel and hear the whispers. By now, you have seen several doctors, medically, mentally, been on several medications, homeless, abused verbally and physically by gay-bashers, religiously ostracized, unemployed, and lack a support system of any kind.

Isolation has prevented socializing with family members, children, siblings, and close friends. The thought of being gay brings on anxiety and depression, which leads to

unprotected sex, with alcohol and/or street drugs and unauthorized prescriptions which leads to HIV/AIDS and STDs, relationships on half.

Health providers not wanting to provide services at 100 percent or even 40 percent, this has been going on since the hands of time. Family, parents feel their loss when their child comes out. They feel like God has punished them for some reason or the other, or they feel like they didn't raise the child correctly.

The younger GLBT community has to worry about coming out in their schools and possibly being beaten up, harassment from educators, and because due to stress school grades have the tendency to be low, and they won't make college.

Children of color experience homophobia as well as racism, higher rates of STDs. HIV and drug abuse is on the rise, and as far back as 1988. The percentage of homelessness in the GLBT community is 20 to 40 percent, maybe even higher. There are no shelters and inadequate services for our community.

A large number of the GLBTQ youths, ages 15 to 25 years of age, are HIV-infected.

Lack of training and education of city workers, educators, police force, corrections, departments of social services, and health administration about how to talk and communicate with this diverse group of people. Disparities come directly from alienation and an unacceptable environment.

The GLBT community remains unwelcome in schools, homes, and business communities. The psychological and emotional turmoil from homophobia and heterosexuality has led to depression, substance abuse, risky behavior, and attempted and completed suicides.

Lack of physical safety and alienation from family and peers is the result of the lack of acceptance of the GLBTQ individuals in our society. Most importantly, the straight community plays a vital role in decisions being made, which are destructive to the GLBT community.

Lack of the necessary tools and education to support the GLBT person or persons, especially those with mental health issues, suggest the reason why as adults, we are looked upon as outcasts or not belonging.

Heart & Ears wants to try to put an end to that along with other communities and organizations, and that is why we are here today. That is why we are here today, and I want to thank you all for listening.

[Applause.]

