

**Finding a Safe Space:  
Prioritizing Safety Considerations for Trans Youth in the Portland  
Homeless Youth Continuum  
Teaching Note**

**Synopsis**

*Finding a Safe Space: Prioritizing Safety Considerations for Trans Youth in the Portland Homeless Youth Continuum* tells the story of a youth kicked out of her house for identifying as transgendered. The case begins with an explanation of gender variance and transgender identity, differentiating between “sex” and “gender.” The youth arrives to Portland, Oregon just as the County has adjusted a Civil Rights Ordinance adding discrimination based on sexual orientation to the state’s list of protected categories.

Because the homeless youth services were predominantly funded by a contract with Multnomah County, contract implementation needed to be in alignment with the governmental rules and procedures. The administration within each agency created a committee to address the need to adapt to the new county ordinance. Favor Ellis, a middle level manager within the homeless youth continuum of services, is faced with the task of adjusting services in a way that will make services safe for both transgender youth, non transgender youth, and an administration resistant to change. She is forced to consider how to make their services more accommodating to transgender youth, while considering staff concerns with the safety of those youth who have backgrounds of sexual assault and may fear sharing a room or a bathroom with a youth born their opposite sex. The reader is invited to decide how to adapt services.

**Case Objectives**

This case looks at social service organizations’ need to create a safe environment for a diverse clientele. The story is told through the lens of a youth accessing those services. Students will be asked to think from the perspective of a member of a social service organization staff committee. The policy the committee considers the safety of transgender youth in co-ed homeless shelters. This case provides a case considering the needs of LBGT youth, a perspective missing from the existing case literature.

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## **Basic Pedagogy**

This case is appropriate for undergraduate or graduate level courses. It could be used in (but not limited to) a Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Non Profit Management, or Ethics course. No prerequisite knowledge needed.

## **Key Issues**

- Awareness of Transgender issues;
- How we know what we know—determining where your information is coming from, how you are coming to decisions, the questioning of assumptions;
- Decision making process within an organization that serves such a diverse population when there are conflicting needs among clients;
- Changing in response to new legal rights and entitlements

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What does the HYC committee need to consider in deciding how to adopt services? What questions should they ask?
2. Should shelters allow clients to stay in the dorms and utilize the bathrooms of the gender they identify (regardless of their sex at birth)?
3. Where does staff get their information to make such decisions? Whose voices are missing?
4. What are the underlying assumptions of staff that are concerned about youth with histories of sexual assault about transgender youth in the system?

## **Additional Information**

Chantelle is a fictional character based on both readings about transgender adolescents and a small group of transgender homeless youth I worked with in the Portland, Oregon Homeless Youth Continuum.

## **For Further Reading**

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## **Interviews**

Anonymous, former homeless youth, Peer Advocate for Janus Youth Programs.

Lori Buckwalter, transgender activist in Portland, Oregon.

Kevin Donegan, Willamette Bridge Programs Director

Favor Ellis, Program Manager for the Janus Youth Programs/Willamette Bridge Reception Center, and well-respected youth advocate. Favor has worked at all three organizations that make up the Homeless Youth Continuum (HYC).

Ann Hinds, contracts with Outside In to develop trans-specific programming, considered an expert within the HYC on trans community issues.