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Author

Permenter, Lauren

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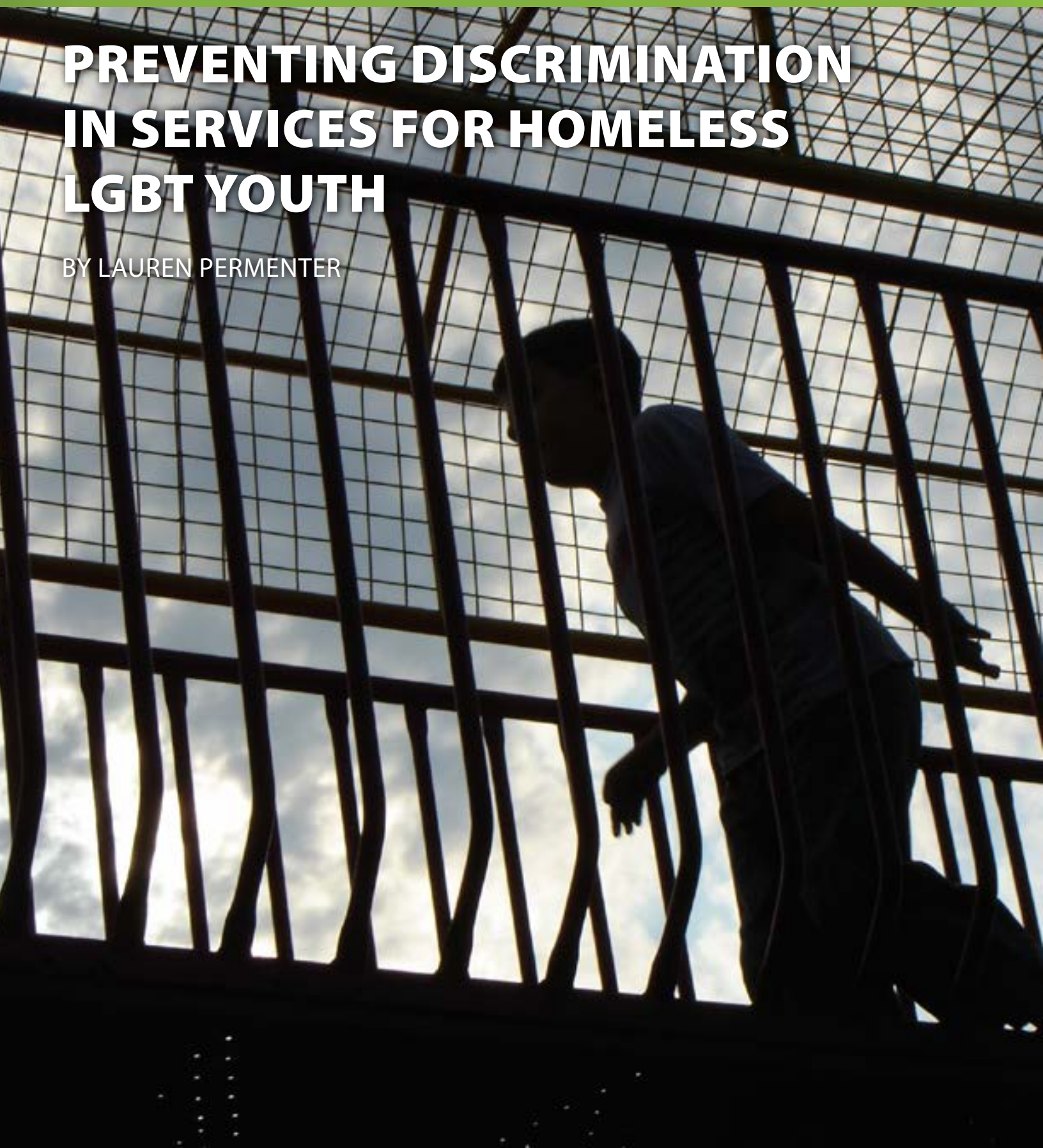
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Policy Brief 7

RETHINKING POLICY ON GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION IN SERVICES FOR HOMELESS LGBT YOUTH

BY LAUREN PERMENTER



PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION IN SERVICES FOR HOMELESS LGBT YOUTH

Revising the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to include protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in shelters and foster care is an essential step towards the creation of safe havens.

EACH YEAR, 1.6 million youth will find themselves homeless.¹ Of these, as many as 40% will self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.² Given that approximately 4% of the adult population of the U.S. identifies as LGBT, this percentage is alarmingly high.³ Sadly, many LGBT youth often feel forced to leave home after their parents prove intolerant of their identity.⁴ While most youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, cite family problems as the reason for running away from home, LGBT youth are more likely to leave home because of physical and sexual abuse.⁵ When these youth do leave home, one would hope that they find safe refuge. Unfortunately, the foster care system and shelters for the homeless have proven discriminatory and unwelcoming.

CRITIQUE

Since LGBT youth often experience higher rates of abuse, many end up in foster care. Yet one study showed that 78% of the LGBT youth who are placed in foster care will wind up on the streets.⁶ If youth choose to flee care that is purportedly safer than the homes from which they were removed, then the solution is not working. Another study found that 100% of LGBT youth in group homes had faced verbal harassment and 70% had been physically assaulted.⁷ It is unacceptable

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that youth should choose the streets over the protection the community provides.

For those LGBT youth who seek the streets as a refuge, the trauma doesn't end. Sadly, they will likely experience continued victimization, including sexual assault.⁸ Not surprisingly, these youth report more frequent drug use, as well as a tendency to try a wider range of drugs.⁹ Homeless LGBT youth are more likely to have sexual intercourse at an earlier age than other homeless youth, to have more partners, and to report a higher incidence of unprotected sex. In addition, they are more likely to engage in sexual activity in exchange for housing.¹⁰ Finally, homeless LGBT youth exhibit higher rates of depression, withdrawn behavior, somatic complaints, aggression, and delinquency.¹¹

Although many homeless youth report a high rate of interaction with at least one family member while living on the streets, those youth who identify as LGBT will instead seek support from their homeless peers.¹² The isolation these youth face is clear, indicating a need for appropriately trained professionals. To provide genuine safe havens for LGBT homeless youth, staff providing services must be competent in caring for this population. Unfortunately, only California has passed a law that protects LGBT youth and foster care providers from discrimination based on sexual orientation and that requires those providers to complete training in nondiscriminatory policies.¹³

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), which was reauthorized as the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act in 2008, provides funding for homeless and runaway youth in emergency shelters, transitional living programs, and drop-in centers. Unfortunately, it does not specify that agencies provide a culturally sensitive environment nor does it prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, RHYA fails to mention gender identity or sexual orientation at all. Inclusion of this population's needs is clearly warranted in light of a high percentage of LGBT youth who report assault and verbal mistreatment in shelters.¹⁴ The reauthorization of RHYA, which will be considered in 2013, is a perfect opportunity to include needed safeguards for LGBT youth. Further, many agencies are unable to provide family reunification or family acceptance programs and cite a lack of resources as the reason for excluding these services.¹⁵ Given the high rate of LGBT youth who leave because of family rejection it is important that some funds from RHYA are allotted specifically for such services.

RECOMMENDATION

Lawmakers should revise and reauthorize RHYA in 2013. The revision should include a protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity in RHYA-funded facilities, a mandate for competency training for staff in RHYA-funded facilities, a requirement that

facilities include specific action steps for providing care to members of the LGBT community in both planning documents and applications submitted for RHYA funding, and a reserved set of funds allocated for the specific purpose of the reunification of LGBT youth with their families.

Lauren Permenter is an M.S.W. student in the Department of Social Welfare in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. She has worked for several years providing direct services to homeless and runaway youth in Los Angeles.

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NOTES

1. Homeless Youth in the United States: Recent Research Findings and Intervention Approaches. Toro, P.A., et al., 2007. *Toward understanding homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*, edited by D. Dennis, G. Locke, and J. Khadduri, pages 1-33, 2007. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/toro/index.htm>> URL accessed August, 2012.
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UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN
Box 957222/Public Policy Bldg 1500
Los Angeles, CA 90095-7222
310 825 0590 • cswpubs@csw.ucla.edu

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