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# Homeless youth shelters and services for transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) clients: Results from a nationwide survey

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored results from a nationwide survey conducted with homeless youth shelter directors. The research sought to further the understanding of how policy and societal changes about gender affirming access to services have affected service delivery and accommodations at homeless youth shelters for transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth. Results from ( $n = 117$ ) youth shelters indicate the majority of those surveyed are current in implementing many of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) gender affirming policies. Among others, recommendations include a need for shelters to incorporate TGNC safety accommodations, and to update dress code policies from a universal design perspective.

## KEYWORDS

Gender non-conforming; homeless youth; policy; shelters; transgender

## Introduction

Youth homeless shelters may provide a safe haven for young people ages 12–24 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020) who are experiencing homelessness. Shelters that have and utilize inclusive policies that respect all guests lay a foundation for safety, and for all youth to feel welcome (Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, 2016). In 2016, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released new equality standards to ensure the needs of transgender people experiencing homelessness are being met. The new HUD standards for housing includes emergency shelters and requires them to use gender affirming inclusive language, creating/updating inclusive shelter policy standards, and creating inclusive spaces where services are offered

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(Code of Federal Regulations, 2016). The study that follows explores how the individual policies of youth shelters perceive to meet the federal standards specifically for youth who are transgender and/or gender non-conforming (TGNC). Specifically, youth emergency shelters across the United States and D.C. were surveyed about their shelter policies and procedures. The data were then explored by the authors as to the current state of youth shelters in meeting the HUD gender affirming standards. The paper begins with relevant definitions and nomenclature followed by a review of the literature pertaining to youth shelters and specifically synthesis of studies related to homeless TGNC youth. Methodology, data analysis, findings, and conclusions follow with specific recommendations for future practice.

### **Relevant nomenclature**

Throughout the paper we utilize the following terms: cisgender, legal gender, transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary. *Cisgender* refers to individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity accords with conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were assigned at birth (Amnesty International, 2014). According to Canavan and Ledger (2016) the term cisgender refers to a non-transgender person. At the time of data collection in 2017, the term *legal gender* was utilized in the study; legal gender is sometimes known as *sex assigned at birth*. Legal gender markers appear on official documents such as birth certificates, driver's license and other identity cards including passports (Amnesty International, 2014). As of 2022, in 21 States and D.C., individuals may mark M (male), F (female), or X (non-binary and/or intersex) on their driver's license (Movement Advancement Project, 2021). However, because the process can be burdensome and costly, many TGNC individuals may be prevented from obtaining accurate identity documents (Movement Advancement Project, 2021). According to the MAP, in collaboration with the National Center for Transgender Equality:

The process by which an individual can change the gender marker on their driver's license and/or birth certificate to accurately reflect their gender identity are governed by state laws and administrative policies and often include intrusive and outdated requirements, such as proof of sex reassignment surgery and court orders (2021).

As policy is continually evolving, legal gender in this paper is utilized as a colloquial term to refer to sex at birth, or the gender marker originally given to individuals at the time of birth.

*Transgender* refers to individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were assigned at birth (Amnesty International, 2014). Canavan and Ledger (2016) note the term transgender is an "umbrella term for people

whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex” (p. 6). *Gender non-conforming* and *gender non-binary* are two of many terms that refer to a person “who does not conform to traditional gender roles,” norms, or related stereotypes (Canavan & Ledger, 2016, p. 5). The authors in the current study recognize that the terms youth may use to identify themselves and their gender(s) vary widely across age groups, cultural identities, and geographically, for example. For the purposes of this study, the terms transgender and TGNC (transgender and gender non-conforming) are used as umbrella terms to encompass all individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth, or a person who does not conform to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and/or who may prefer to not use stereotypical binary male/female terms to self-identify their gender.

### ***Youth homelessness and shelter needs***

Accurate data on the prevalence of housing insecurity and homelessness among youth in general are lacking due to inconsistent definitions of youth homelessness (Fraser et al., 2019; Anthony & Fisher, 2016). Henry et al. (2020) reported that for the 2019 point-in-time count, approximately 152,698 youth under the age of 25 were considered homeless. During the 2018–2019 school year, approximately 125,729 unaccompanied youth received services for homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act (National Center for Homeless Education, 2019). The difference between these two sets of data illustrates some of the challenges of identifying the population of youth experiencing homelessness (i.e. definitions of homelessness, data synthesis, safety concerns, rural/urban definitions etc.). The inability to accurately count this youth population experiencing homelessness is a barrier to youth in receiving adequate services (Narendorf et al., 2016; Ha et al., 2015). In their study, Narendorf et al. (2016) utilized a four-week count period to identify youth experiencing homelessness with the specific intention to address the methodological challenges of a single point-in-time count. They found that the use of enumeration efforts in counting youth demonstrated a promising approach to address size and health service needs of homeless youth (Narendorf et al., 2016). The literature has demonstrated that youth who experience homelessness behave differently and have different needs than adults experiencing homelessness. For example, Ha et al. (2015) conducted interviews over a six month period with 49 youth ages 18–24 identified as homeless and found that, in contrast to adults experiencing homelessness, youth try to blend in with their peers, resist being identified as homeless, and are less likely to seek out services, especially in emergency shelters. Likewise, in the Slesnick et al. (2016) study with a sample of youth ages 12–17, researchers also identified similar challenges for homeless youth with regard to service utilization and shelter access. Implications from the

studies indicate youth are more likely to utilize shelters and/or drop-in services when they are youth-focused and cater to their specific needs (Slesnick et al., 2016; Ha et al., 2015). Youth experiencing homelessness are considered a high risk, vulnerable population (Henry et al., 2020) and are at high risk of sexual abuse (Santa Maria et al., 2020) and human trafficking (Middleton et al., 2018; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2019). In a 2012 comprehensive study of state laws affecting unaccompanied minors, The National Network for Youth found that due to age restrictions, homeless youth under the age of 18 often have a harder time accessing mental and physical health care and other social services. When shelters are able to address these issues in a youth oriented and developmentally sensitive way, youth are more apt to seek out and utilize their services (Slesnick et al., 2016).

Comfort and safety are also barriers to youth accessing shelter services. In their interviews with youth experiencing homelessness, Ha et al. (2015) found that many youth felt safer sleeping on the streets or on a stranger's couch than in a shelter. They often expressed fear of physical violence, being bitten by bed bugs, or catching lice by staying at a shelter. Homeless youth ages 12–24 also feared being arrested for status offenses or ending up in foster care if they sought shelter services (Bardine & National Network's Policy Advisory Committee, 2015). In their research of drop-in center use versus shelter use, Slesnick et al. (2016) found that youth were often put off by shelter workers' perceived judgmental attitudes. Furthermore, youth also expressed a dislike of shelters because of the rules and restrictions (e.g., dress codes, dating, curfews, and chores) they are required to abide by in order to receive services (Slesnick et al., 2016; Ha et al., 2015). Likewise, according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019) youth may avoid adult shelters given they may contain activities and certain behaviors they wish to avoid such as substance use and access, and physical and other forms of violence.

### ***TGNC youth shelter needs***

Youth who are experiencing homelessness and identify under the TGNC umbrella may experience additional needs and risk factors that are unique to this population (Fraser et al., 2019). Despite multiple challenges surrounding data collection and analysis, there is a growing body of literature documenting the disproportionate numbers of TGNC youth who are experiencing homelessness (see for example, Abramovich & Shelton, 2017). The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress stated that there were 4,617 TGNC identified individuals who were homeless in 2019 (Henry et al., 2020). One issue that differentiates many transgender youth apart from cisgender youth is their pathway to

homelessness (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017). Much like their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) identified counterparts, TGNC youth experience multiple risk factors contributing to homelessness including family conflict (related to their gender identity/gender expression), trauma, abuse, mental illness, abandonment, other forms of neglect and family poverty (Wheeler et al., 2017; Choi et al. 2015). Choi et al. (2015) found that 55.3% of LGBQ youth and 67.1% of transgender (T) youth experiencing homelessness were forced out of their family homes because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This rejection by family increases the need for shelters to provide therapeutic services (or referrals) for LGBTQ youth. In addition to familial rejection, homeless transgender youth have also encountered barriers such as harassment in schools and discrimination in employment and housing (Fraser et al., 2019). When compared to their cisgender counterparts, transgender youth are also more likely to have experienced bullying, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, human trafficking, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Choi et al., 2015). This history of trauma experienced by transgender youth (Wilson et al., 2014) suggests the need for culturally relevant services offered by staff trained in the needs and interventions appropriate for transgender and gender non-conforming youth (Wheeler et al., 2017; Castellanos, 2016; Crossley, 2015; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). TGNC youth can be fearful of using shelter services because of the prevalence of harassment and assault against LGBTQ youth in shelters by both peers and staff (Wheeler et al., 2017). These negative shelter experiences may lead TGNC youth to avoid shelters and increase their vulnerability to prostitution, substance abuse, and other risk behaviors (Crossley, 2015).

When they arrive in homeless shelters, it is likely TGNC youth will encounter *cisnormativity* (Pyne, 2011), a term used to describe the assumption that all people born male will naturally become men, and all those born female will naturally become women. Cisnormativity is problematic because it assumes a gender binary and raises questions about the erasure of TGNC people within an exclusively gender-specific shelter system (Pyne, 2011). For example, shelters often provide gender-specific housing that separates men from women or coed facilities with segregated dorms (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Johnson et al. (2018) state that transgender youth who are marginalized through other identities such as a visible minority status (e.g., race/skin color, hair texture, and facial features) are among the most marginalized populations in the United States. Thus, Johnson et al. (2018) suggest that changes to both policy and practices for LGBTQ youth will warrant safety for all youth accessing shelters.

### ***Federal policy***

In a press release dated September 20, 2016, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) noted their final rule HUD No. 16-137 ensuring equal access to housing and services regardless of gender identity. HUD identified in their research that due to violence, discrimination, and harassment in accessing programs and services, many transgender shelter seekers would choose the streets rather than sleep in a shelter that requires them to sleep in a space designated for their assigned sex at birth rather than their gender identity. Based on their research, the HUD Equal Access and Gender Identity Rules requires the following (effective October 21, 2016): (1) Equal access is provided to all HUD assisted programs, (2) Individuals are placed in accordance with their gender identity, (3) No requirements for individuals to “prove” their gender identity, and (4) Providers must update their policies and procedures to reflect these requirements.

### ***Overview of the research***

The following research sought to further the understanding of how HUD policy about gender affirming services have affected service delivery and accommodations at homeless youth shelters across the United States. The research study asked the following questions: What accommodations are homeless youth shelters providing to their clients? Do these accommodations align with current HUD 16-137 policy and similar relevant best practices?

### ***Methodology***

#### ***Recruitment***

A comprehensive list of homeless youth shelters across the 50 states and the D.C. was constructed using the following terms in a systematic, state-by-state search of the Google search engine: “homeless youth shelter.” All identified programs were reviewed to screen in emergency shelters and screen out transitional living and maternity group home programs that did not also offer an emergency shelter. For each emergency shelter identified, their location, executive director (ED), and the ED’s email were collected. When the ED and/or their email was unavailable, the researchers identified an administrator, program manager, or other relevant staff member as the contact person. If necessary due to lack of other available contact information, the shelter’s general contact email was used. The generated list of shelters was cross-referenced with recipients of the Family & Youth Services Bureau, Runaway and Homeless Youth Basic Center Program grantees website (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb>) in March 2017 and



compared to state-specific homeless youth shelter directories when available to help ensure that a comprehensive list was developed. From the search, a list of 414 shelters and corresponding email addresses was generated.

Prior to recruitment of any participants, this study was reviewed and approved by two University Institutional Review Boards (each of the lead researchers' home institutions). The final shelter list was used to recruit participants for the online survey via email. Survey participants received an initial invitation to participate in the online survey in the beginning of March 2017 and two reminder emails. Survey collection ended on April 30, 2017. Participants could select to be entered into a drawing for one of three \$50 gift cards along with being shared information about contacting the researchers for a copy of the final report.

### *Measure and analysis*

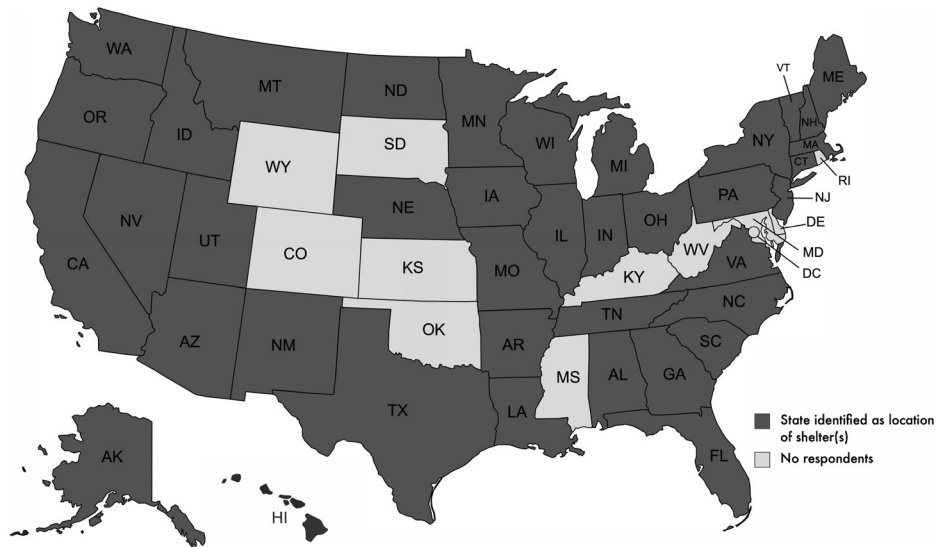
An online survey using Qualtrics was developed to answer the research questions. The survey consisted of open and close-ended questions about services, shelter policies for youth including those who are transgender and gender non-conforming, shelter funding sources, and location of shelter services. For example, questions inquired about intake policies, dress code policies, sleeping, toilet, and shower accommodations, and any other types of services provided. One section of the survey focused on demographic questions about the person completing the survey and also asked their opinion about which services were most important in relation to serving transgender youth. The survey was reviewed by an expert in homelessness and revisions in wording were made based upon the expert's recommendations. Data for this study were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

## **Results**

### *Sample*

In total, 170 individuals accessed the online survey; however, 53 surveys were excluded from the final analysis. Of the excluded responses, two did not provide consent, eight failed to answer any questions, and 18 provided no information other than they were a homeless shelter for youth. The final 25 surveys excluded were due to missing or incomplete data related to the analysis of this paper. The findings represent data from a final sample size of 117 respondents affiliated with homeless youth shelters across the United States ( $N=117$ ). Of these, 116 provided the name of the state where they are located. There were zero identified respondents from Colorado, Delaware, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma,





**Figure 1.** State map of respondent shelter locations.

Rhode Island, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia. States with shelters represented in this study are identified in the map in [Figure 1](#).

### ***Respondent demographics***

The majority of the survey respondents shared demographic information about themselves ([Table 1](#)). The 117 respondents worked at their shelter for an average of 10.2 years (SD = 8.9) and, more generally, with homeless youth for 14.3 years (SD = 9.8). More than three quarters ( $n = 97$ , 78.6%) of the survey respondents providing demographic characteristics were in a leadership position with their shelter.

### ***Shelter, funding, and client characteristics***

The characteristics of the 117 shelters are depicted in [Table 2](#) and indicate the shelters had an average of 17 beds (range 2–119; SD 15.2) with an average of 14.2 youth sheltered per night (range 0–160; SD = 30). The majority (91.5%,  $n = 107$ ) of shelters collect gender identity information from clients, and approximately 63% ( $n = 57$ ) of shelters were located in a community with 100,000 people or more.

The majority of shelters ( $n = 113$ ) receive funding from multiple sources, and include federal grants ( $n = 102$ ), in-kind donations ( $n = 98$ ), cash donations ( $n = 97$ ), city/community grants ( $n = 95$ ), state grants ( $n = 82$ ), and foundation grants ( $n = 78$ ). Additional sources of funding that shelters

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

	M	SD
Years worked for shelter; range: 0.5–40	10.2	8.9
Years worked with homeless youth; range: 0.5–47	14.3	9.8
	<i>n</i>	%
Shelter role ( <i>n</i> = 117)*		
Executive director	30	25.6
Chief operating officer	1	<1
Program director	61	52.1
Outreach coordinator	4	3.4
Social worker	2	1.7
Case manager	4	3.4
Administrative staff	7	6
Other	8	6.8
Gender		
Female	86	73.5
Gender queer/Gender non-conforming	6	5.1
Male	23	19.7
Highest education level		
Some college	3	2.6
Associate degree/Vocational certificate	2	1.7
Bachelor degree	49	41.9
Some graduate degree	8	6.8
Master degree	52	44.4
Doctorate	3	2.6

Note. *n* = 117

\*Fourteen respondents selected more than one agency role. For these respondents, their highest ranked position was used to create this table.

received include support from a religious organization (*n* = 28) or other sources (*n* = 17) such as interagency revenue or Medicaid.

### **Policies and services impacting TGNC youth**

Private intake spaces were available in 94.9% (*n* = 111) youth shelters. While a majority of shelters offered accommodations that matched a youth's gender identity (*n* = 103, 88%), there were still 14 (12%) who did not. Similarly, 14 shelters (12%) required youth to use shelter shower facilities that matched their legal gender. Almost 90% of respondents (*n* = 105) were able to confirm that their shelter provides training to staff specific to working with transgender clients. Additional responses to policies and services impacting TGNC youth are depicted in [Table 3](#).

Of the 31 shelters that do not provide gender-neutral restrooms and are without single-stall options, seven (22.6%) require TGNC youth to use the restroom that matches their legal gender.

### **Discussion and recommendations**

The results of this study imply the current state of youth homeless shelters with regard to gender affirming policies and practices, specifically related to HUD rules, indicate many strengths and also several opportunities for

**Table 2.** Shelter characteristics.

	M	SD
Number of beds; range: 2–119	17	15.2
Minimum age of youth; range: 0–18	11.9	4.4
Maximum age of youth; range: 14–26	19.2	2.8
Average youth sheltered per night*; range: 0–160	14.2	30
Gender reported by clients (as % average/month)		
Cisgender	81.87	29.9
Transgender	7.25	12.2
Gender identity unknown	10.88	29
	<i>n</i>	%
Collects clients' gender identity information		
No	8	6.8
Yes	107	91.5
"I don't know"	2	1.7
Religious affiliation**		
No	115	98.3
Yes	1	<1
No response		
Operates year-round		
No	1	<1
Yes	116	99.1
Population size of community		
Where shelter is located		
0–9,999	2	1.7
10,000–49,999	22	18.8
50,000–99,999	19	16.2
100,000–199,999	18	15.4
200,000–299,999	13	11.1
300,000–399,999	7	6
400,000–499,999	3	2.6
500,000–999,999	12	10.3
1,000,000+	16	13.7
No response	2	1.7

Note:  $n = 117$

\*( $n = 112$ ); \*\*( $n = 116$ )

change and improvement. As noted previously, HUD Equal Access and Gender Identity Rules require equal access to all HUD assisted programs, individuals be placed in accordance with their gender identity, no requirements for individuals to “prove” their gender identity, and shelters must update their policies and procedures to reflect these requirements. This study included a number of shelters that had a confused mixture of accommodations and policies impacting TGNC youth indicating HUD policy compliance in some areas of the shelter and out of compliance in others. For example, while some shelters in the study offered sleeping and restroom accommodations based on gender identity and not legal gender, they simultaneously had dress-codes based on legal gender. Mixed policies and procedures could result in uneven, and continued discriminatory, services for youth even among shelters who viewed themselves as welcoming to all. As of April, 2021, the Biden administration announced that the HUD Equal Access Rule is here to stay. For a tenuous period prior to the end of President Trump’s administration, he issued several last-minute proposals

**Table 3.** Policies and services impacting TGNC youth

	<i>n</i>	%
Private intake space		
No	6	5.1
Yes	111	94.9
Offered shelter accommodations that match their gender identity		
No	14	12
Yes	103	88.0
Gender-neutral restrooms		
No	31	26.5
Yes	86	73.5
Youth must use shelter shower facilities that match their legal gender		
No	102	87.2
Yes	14	12
No response	1	<1
Gender-neutral dress code (i.e. applies to all youth, not based on gender)		
No	53	45.3
Yes	57	48.7
“I don’t know”	5	4.3
No response	2	1.7
Shelter polices for transgender youth are advertised		
No	75	64.1
Yes	36	30.8
“I don’t know”	6	5.1
Staff receive training specific to working with transgender clients		
No	7	6
Yes	105	89.7
“I don’t know”	5	4.3

Note: *n* = 117

to change the rules for homeless shelters including denying transgender people from entering a single-sex facility based on their gender identity (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2022). The Equal Access Rule continues to ensure that HUD funded shelters and housing cannot deny critical protections for TGNC individuals. Based on the results of this study and with the HUD rules in mind, several recommendations and implications are formed for future practice, policy, and research. The following suggestions are about some of the ways to bring an agency into compliance with the established federal regulations.

Shelters serving youth are encouraged to *continue updating and reviewing their policies* to ensure that they reflect not only HUD Equal Access Rules, but also conform to current best practices for gender affirming practices and services. Funding for the youth shelters in this study typically came from multiple sources that included federal grant funding. Thus, compliance with HUD requirements is essential for these shelters to continue to receive federal dollars to support their clients. While 18 states and D.C. explicitly prohibit anti-LGBT housing discrimination, the HUD rules are particularly important in the states without this type of policy (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2022). Similarly, continued financial support from states, communities, and other funding sources that have regulated or adopted supportive shelter policies for youth who are TGNC will require shelters actively address and maintain compliance with said policies. Shelters

should regularly update their policies to include nondiscrimination policies that address youth who are TGNC. Relatedly, the concept of universal design and expanding its definition for gender affirming practices and policies (Daniels & Geiger, 2010), is highly recommended for all youth shelters. The philosophy of universal design based on gender identity constitutes acceptance of equal access, equal opportunities, and equal treatment for all, which in youth shelters specifically may have a positive impact for TGNC youth. For example, rather than having a dress code based on binary definitions of gender, there could be one universally designed dress code for shelter guests. Additional specific guidance to dress-codes and other gender affirming practices can be found in the HUD (2016) Toolkit which is a free and accessible resource for shelters to utilize for policy modification and implementation for federal requirements. Similarly, gender affirming practices in health and support services are available from the National LGBT Health Education Centers (see: <https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/>). Based on our data, shelters are encouraged to revisit and update dress code policies in all shelters to be gender affirming and, likewise gender-neutral (i.e. universal design). Updated and contemporary dress code policies create a culture of respect where youth are able to continue taking ownership of their lives (Winn, n.d.) including wearing clothes that affirm their identity.

All shelter policies must be advertised and posted in a way that is accessible for all clients. Our data indicated almost two-thirds of shelters are not advertising their policies applicable to TGNC clients. Advertising policies that impact TGNC clients can reassure youth of their welcome and reduce their hesitancy to seek services and shelter. Posting policies can also help staff and clients identify when they are not being followed. In addition to the shelter addressing concerns, information can also be shared about the HUD portal page where complaints can be filed by staff and clients alike regarding treatment and harassment observed or experienced in shelters and other housing accommodations.

Private intake spaces were available in 95% of the shelters surveyed which was a strength in the results. However, shelters without private intake spaces are recommended to identify a way to make intake private, be it through privacy walls or a separate room dedicated for intake to ensure safety from the moment a youth accesses these essential services. Staff should continue to avoid asking personal questions unrelated to the provision of housing or shelter, especially regarding medical treatment (see for example, Canavan & Ledger, 2016). Another strength identified in this study is the number of shelters who provide sleeping and shower facilities that allow a youth to choose accommodations based on their gender identity (88%), have gender-neutral restrooms (73.5%), or single-stall showers/restrooms (87.2%). Shelters who do not yet offer such accommodations should advocate for their

inclusion in their facility. While these may mean identifying new funding sources and community education and outreach efforts, the benefit will be seen in providing welcoming services for all youth. Youth shelters are encouraged to continue accessing new funds, adopting relevant policies, and implementing appropriate practices to continue serving TGNC youth with the most current evidence-based care. It is also important to reiterate, data for this study were collected in 2017 and while at that time some facilities were out of compliance with HUD rules, further research is needed to track the most up-to-date compliance and related policy response by youth serving shelters. Relatedly, future research is needed to better understand ways to support TGNC homeless youth with shelter policies, particularly given the context of the global pandemic (COVID-19) addressing the potential for services ending or changes in shelter capacity. Finally, at the time of this writing, there continues to be an influx of state law proposals and adoptions that are specifically anti-transgender focused, creating a growing solicitude for TGNC youth and practitioner/provider safety alike (see for example, Torchinsky, 2022). Social service providers are urged to stay current with policies that may impact their clients or their own ability to offer specific services, by tracking legislation that either advance or negatively target TGNC youth. Thus, one final recommendation for staying current in practice and policy adoption, sorted by topic, includes accessing the Freedom For All Americans Legislative Tracker (found at <https://freedomforallamericans.org/legislative-tracker/>).

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