

New report highlights needs of LGBT Chicagoans

By Waymon Hudson June 27, 2012

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CHICAGO, IL -- An assessment on the needs of Chicagoland's LGBT Community, the first of its kind in nearly 10 years, has just been released by The LGBT Community Fund. The report was based on a series of surveys, interviews and focus groups with over 2,000 LGBTQ Chicagoans, and took place over a period of two and a half months with data provided by the Morten Group.

The LGBT Community Fund commissioned the needs assessment to collect data to inform future funding decisions for the Chicago Community Trust to nonprofits serving Chicagoland's LGBT Community.

This needs assessment report found that some of the top needs of the LGBT Community in the Chicago area were: affordable health services and care (66%); access to government benefits, rights and services (43%); sustainable employment (33%); community safety and violence (25%); and protections discrimination based on class, race or age (21-24%).

They also found some key themes within this data that further illuminate the areas in most need:

Unique Needs of LGBT Seniors- this group faces serious needs in affordable housing, safe and easy access to government & vocational services, and health care;

Commonalities Between LGBT Seniors & Youth- both groups have needs in housing, resources, employment, and health-care support;

Support for LGBT Families- this group is need of child care assistance, help with bullying, and parental support groups; **Needs of the Unemployed and Underemployed**- this group is need of livable wages, access to government support programs, strong employment networks, and more effective police responsiveness;

Diversity Within the LGBT Community- the entire community is in need of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of the community-- whether it be economic, cultural, racial, age, or occupational;

Impact of the Recession on the LGBT Community- unemployment and underemployment are exacerbated by discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity;

Existing Resources and Underserved Areas- the community needs to focus on how to best utilize existing resources and support new innovations in underserved areas.

The report also notes the increased challenge of addressing these needs when issues of race, age, and geography are introduced.

The need to move into underserved areas and to underrepresented groups is a common theme throughout the findings-- further highlighting an undercurrent of unrecognized diversity within the LGBT community itself. In fact, the way the study itself was conducted shows just how such recognition is vitally needed.

Getting a Diverse Representation

"We went into this project with definite ideas to increase access and inclusion," said Mary Morten, president of Morten Group, which collected and analyzed the data. "We wanted it to be accessible in many separate ways. We knew going in that the 'digital divide' still exists-- it was fairly clear mistrust of putting personal information online was still a concern for many in the community. That's why community drop boxes, for those who felt more comfortable writing answers or didn't have Internet access, were seen as very important."

Dr. Keisha Farmer-Moore, the Principal Investigator of the study, explained the study's process, "We used a technique called ground theory, which uses the data as it came in to shape our approach to get a more diverse sample."

The approach seems to have worked. Three weeks into the survey, the group found that as much as 80% of respondents were Caucasian. "We weren't happy with that," says Morten, "So we moved to different communities with different outreach. We got that number down to around 65%. From the beginning we really wanted to cast a wide net. We went in with clear ideas on the diversity we wanted and then broadened out to achieve it."

That approach also included many moves to expand access to the study. The online survey was available in both English and Spanish, while paper copies of the survey were provided to those without Internet access. In addition, the 60 partner organizations placed drop boxes in their buildings, where individuals filled out more than 300 brief data cards responding to questions about the Community's most critical needs. Data cards were available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, Korean and Vietnamese. Also, several focus groups targeted specific demographic groups, such as youth, seniors, Spanish speakers, suburban residents and undocumented individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, neighborhoods and socio-economic levels.

New Insights, New Data, Expanded View

The assessment itself was initially patterned on other similar studies done in large cities, like New York City and San Francisco, as well as statewide studies from places like Arizona and Nebraska. And while there were similarities, the needs of the Chicago LGBT community also showed some new insights.

"Our sample size was actually bigger than some statewide groups. While we did see some similar results in needs compared to other city's and state's assessments, we also saw some surprisingly unique issues," said Mary Morten. "Public health, for example, was similar to New York City and San Francisco, yet some of the conversations around access to services are unique to Chicago. The commonalities between issues for LGBT youth and seniors was also new to our survey."

Another surprising uniqueness to the Chicago assessment were the amount of survey takers who responded as single-- almost 60%. This differed widely from many other assessments, which had older participants who mostly identified as partnered or in long-term relationships. That may have played into Chicago's different results with issues like healthcare ranking above more visible issues like marriage equality.

"I was actually surprised to see healthcare as the top concern and not marriage equality," Morten explains. "It really shows that we have to look at our lives in a holistic matter-- it really benefits us as a community and as allies to take a broader view. This week, for example, we're set to hear from the Supreme Court on healthcare, which is obviously a top issue for the LGBT community. If we don't have our health, not a lot else matters. We have to expand our view on what is an 'LGBT' issue. I think the information in this survey really shows that."

You can download the full LGBT Community Needs Assessment here.