Community Conversations on Speaking OUT:
Ideas for Taking Action
Background

In November 2017, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released Speaking OUT: A Special Report on LGBTQ2S+ Young People in the Child Welfare and Youth Justice Systems. In Alberta, there have been—and continue to be—positive changes for LGBTQ2S+ people. However, even with this progress, LGBTQ2S+ young people still experience high levels of homelessness, suicide, mental illness, addiction and violence. No child should feel bad about who they are—and LGBTQ2S+ children and youth in the child welfare and youth justice systems need to feel safe and accepted. No matter where they live, they have a right to feel welcomed and be able to access the services and supports that they need.

In the process of developing Speaking OUT, we heard from over 270 young people and stakeholders across Alberta through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and an online survey. Based on what we heard, four themes emerged: identity, safety, appropriate places to live, and services and support. The experiences and knowledge shared with us shone a light on both what was working for young people and the barriers they face in the child welfare and youth justice systems. This Special Report highlighted five recommendations to improve services for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth. The recommendations are as follows:

1. The Ministry of Children’s Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should make certain that LGBTQ2S+ specific training and education is required for all employees who work directly with young people or make decisions that affect them.

2. The Ministry of Children’s Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should create LGBTQ2S+ specific living options for young people.

3. The Ministry of Children’s Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should review and revise their policies and practices in relation to identity, safety, appropriate places to live, and services and supports for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth.

4. The Ministry of Children’s Services should establish policy that guides decision-making for employees in their role as guardian, regarding consent for medical interventions and support services for transgender young people.

5. The Ministry of Children’s Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General should ensure young people in their care receive appropriate and inclusive sexual health information.
Community Conversations

From March to June of 2018, the OCYA hosted five community conversations across Alberta about the Speaking OUT report. These forums were held in Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, Grande Prairie and Lethbridge.

The purpose of these meetings was to further conversations that began in Speaking OUT, and to discuss how to take action on the resulting recommendations. During these meetings, there was an eagerness to support LGBTQ2S+ young people, and to create change within communities across Alberta. The willingness to improve services was inspiring and encouraging.

Approach

Stakeholders were invited to a half-day meeting to discuss the themes and recommendations in the Speaking OUT report. Conversations focused on two areas: stakeholders’ experiences with the themes (identity, safety, placement, services and support); and the five recommendations highlighted in the report. The conversations about the themes happened throughout the sessions, and the discussions on the recommendations were initiated by these questions:

• Why did you choose to discuss this recommendation?
• Why is it important to you?
• What can you do to contribute to this recommendation in your community or in your work?

We also asked individuals to provide an anonymous response to the following question:

• What is one thing you can take away from today’s session and implement in your workplace? (Appendix A)

OCYA staff facilitated the conversations and recorded the information that was shared.

Who We Heard From

Community conversation attendees included young people, as well as stakeholders from the Ministry of Children’s Services, the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General, and agencies serving children and youth. Overall, we heard from more than 170 people throughout the province (Appendix B).
What We Heard

The goal of the conversations was to support action on the recommendations made in the Speaking OUT report. We heard a lot about people’s work and life experiences—what was going well, and the challenges that they continue to experience when working with LGBTQ2S+ young people. It is important to note that we heard about regional, organizational, and individual differences. Individuals and organizations are at different stages in their understanding and ability to support LGBTQ2S+ young people. We also heard that access to resources was different across communities.

In the following section, an overview of the conversations is provided. The themes of identity, safety, appropriate places to live, and services and supports are woven throughout the discussions for each of the recommendations.

Community conversations in response to recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1
Specific training and education is required for all employees who work directly with young people or make decisions that affect them.

In every community we heard about the importance of training. Participants told us that training that focused on language, issues faced by LGBTQ2S+ young people, and strategies for being inclusive was helpful. Perspectives varied on whether LGBTQ2S+ training should be mandatory for all staff members (including management and administrative staff) or if this training should be targeted specifically towards frontline staff.

“The more knowledge we have, the better help we can offer.”
– Stakeholder

There was general consensus that stakeholders need support to know what resources are available to LGBTQ2S+ young people, both regionally and across the province. Some communities identified the importance of having a point person who has a thorough understanding of working with LGBTQ2S+ young people, and who also knows about the resources and services available.

Some communities had more knowledge and resources than others to support LGBTQ2S+ children and youth, but there was a consistent willingness to learn. Many people expressed their frustration with the lack of LGBTQ2S+ specific services within their communities. They believed that the lack of resources and training available to them could negatively impact their work with LGBTQ2S+ young people. Concerns were brought forward that if service providers did not have training or support, this would result in further feelings of isolation for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth.
We heard about the importance of LGBTQ2S+ young people having a network of support, and how this support could prevent feelings of isolation. It was felt that natural supports—parents, family, and community members—offer the most long-term benefits to LGBTQ2S+ young people. We heard that it was essential that these natural supports also have access to training and support. Resources discussed included the Centre for Sexuality (formally known as the “Calgary Sexual Health Centre”)\(^1\) along with the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS).\(^2\) Both of these organizations have programs for natural supports with a focus on offering training and support.

> “Parents also need space that is safe for people to disagree, to talk about the fears or assumptions that they don’t love their kids.” – Stakeholder

> “[We] can create safety through a non-judgmental environment... [we] need to create room for dialogue in the workplace to allow for this to occur.”
>  – Stakeholder

The *Speaking OUT* report emphasized that young people have the right to safety. Safety occurs when young people do not fear the risk of physical, sexual, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual injury.

The importance of safety for young people was highlighted repeatedly within community conversations, and was often connected to the training and supports available to stakeholders. We heard that there was a need to offer staff and caregivers opportunities to learn, so that they may be better able to support and create safe relationships and places for LGBTQ2S+ young people.

> “Regardless of our values and beliefs, we should all be able to agree that we want our kids to be safe, healthy, happy and free of discrimination.”
>  – Stakeholder

Some stakeholders said that their personal values don’t align with supporting LGBTQ2S+ young people. Others indicated that they are working towards becoming supportive, but require personal learning and growth first. We heard personal experiences of stakeholders afraid of being judged due to their lack of knowledge about LGBTQ2S+ young people. It was clear that it was important to have safe places for staff and caregivers to learn—an environment free from criticism and judgment. It was suggested numerous times that having a point person in the workplace to go to with questions may reduce some barriers to staff reaching out, as would being able to access LGBTQ2S+ training. By knowing what resources and services are available to them, a worker may feel more competent and able to support LGBTQ2S+ young people.

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1. [https://www.centreforsexuality.ca](https://www.centreforsexuality.ca)
2. [https://www.ualberta.ca/ismss/](https://www.ualberta.ca/ismss/)
“Just as it is important for [LGBTQ2S+] young people to have a safe space, it is equally important for adults to have one as well. They need a space in which people hear them, respecting what they have to say... If we truly hope to educate adults on [LGBTQ2S+] identities and issues, we must secure places where they are comfortable speaking out, where they can ask questions without fear – a space where their voice is not attacked.” – Young Person

Community safety for LGBTQ2S+ young people was also discussed. Individuals stated that they may be able to create safety for LGBTQ2S+ young people within their organizations, but they hear from these young people that they experience discrimination and abuse when they are out in the community. Stakeholders believed young people should feel safe in their communities, but many indicated that they didn’t know how to start creating a more accepting and inclusive society—it seemed overwhelming. There was strong agreement that putting up a rainbow sign is not enough—that more work still needs to be done to ensure LGBTQ2S+ young people are safe wherever they are.

**RECOMMENDATION 2**
Create LGBTQ2S+ specific living options for young people.

LGBTQ2S+ young people living in various placements, including those who had experienced homelessness, participated in the *Speaking OUT* report. As identified in the report, the primary cause of homelessness for LGBTQ2S+ young people is family rejection. Based on the number of LGBTQ2S+ young people experiencing homelessness or unsafe/unstable living situations, it is important that supportive placements are identified, and that young people are included in the decision-making process about where they will live.

“Caseworkers [are] to find respectful/appropriate placements where [young people] can grow and gain confidence.”
– Stakeholder

Conversations stressed the importance of matching young people with their placements. This matching process needs to ensure young people are being moved into placements that will respect their gender and sexual identities. Discussions highlighted the need for young people to participate in decisions regarding their placements. Examples included:

- LGBTQ2S+ young people not wanting to be placed in LGBTQ2S+ specific placements.
- Young people wanting to be placed in a group home according to their identified (rather than assigned) gender.
- Young people struggling to find living accommodations where they are safe to discuss their gender and sexual identities.

Regardless of the situation, we heard young people’s basic needs must be met before focusing on their sexual and gender identities. It was stressed that young people’s psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being need to be nurtured in order for them to feel safe in a placement.
Conversations also emphasized the need for caregivers, specifically foster parents and kinships providers, to offer safe places for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth to live. There was a recommendation put forward to ask potential foster caregivers (and all staff working with young people) specific questions and present scenarios in interviews to assess their willingness and ability to work with LGBTQ2S+ children and youth. Participants stressed the importance of offering LGBTQ2S+ training to all caregivers to assist in providing safe placements for young people.

“Placement is foundational because it impacts other outcomes and capacity to forge positive/strong relationships. Placement impacts [the] entire system of well-being.” – Stakeholder

Conversations about placements did vary throughout the province. Some communities advised that there is already a shortage of foster caregivers. Conversations about placements did vary throughout the province. Some communities advised that there is already a shortage of foster homes. Concerns were raised that limiting the caregivers who are licensed based on willingness/ability to care for LGBTQ2S+ children and youth could significantly reduce the number of licensed caregivers in the province. Despite the concern, there was an understanding of the need to develop and recruit LGBTQ2S+ friendly homes.

RECOMMENDATION 3
Revise policy and practices to support LGBTQ2S+ young people.

One of the themes in the Speaking OUT report is identity. Identity is a person’s concept of self. There are many aspects that make up identity (e.g. heritage, religion, beliefs, culture, disability, etc.). Sexual orientation and gender identity are also core aspects of a person’s identity. Young people told us about the positive impact caring and accepting adults had on their well-being. If young people feel their identity—who they are—is not accepted, it impacts their ability to lead an authentic life.

We heard about the importance of young people having autonomy over their own gender and sexual identities. There were conversations about young people and their right to privacy—on whether there is a need to disclose their gender and sexual identities when they move to new placements. We heard that in most circumstances placement providers and frontline staff were notified of an LGBTQ2S+ young person’s gender or sexual identities prior to the young person coming into the placement. This does not allow the young person to decide to disclose this information on their own terms, and can impact the safety of that young person.

“Young people should have choice to reveal gender and sexual identity.”
– Stakeholder

Stakeholders discussed the use of intake forms within their organizations and agencies. There were mixed perspectives on whether it was important to include a young person’s gender and/or pronouns on intake forms. Some stakeholders believed that knowing an individual’s gender identity can help staff to provide and create safety, while other stakeholders believed that a young person may not want to disclose their sexual or gender identities.
The *Speaking OUT* report cited Alberta’s provincial *LGBTQ2S Youth Housing and Shelter Guidelines* as a tool to provide practical direction on organization intake forms.³

Community stakeholders across the province stressed the necessity of including young people in the development of any LGBTQ2S+ specific training and policy. There was overall agreement that policy needed to be developed to guide practice, however, it was felt that there needed to be accountability if policy is not followed. We heard about the importance of leadership role modelling this practice, and ensuring that this is an ongoing expectation for staff.

> “Policy [is] sometimes just for optics... follow-through [is needed].”
> - Stakeholder

**RECOMMENDATION 4**

Establish policy that guides decision-making for employees in their role as guardian, regarding consent for medical interventions and support services for transgender young people.

> “Medical conditions need to be supported in a timely manner... young people know their gender identity at a young age.” – Stakeholder

Conversations stressed the need for Children’s Services to develop policy specifically for transgender young people because the current policy is not sufficient. Some of the medical treatments for transgender young people need to begin prior to puberty. This requires knowledge of the transition process, the services (medical and psychological) required, and timely decision-making. Policy that guides decision-makers in this process would ensure that the appropriate services and supports are offered to young people at the right time. We also heard that this policy needs to be clear about the supports (financial and other) available to young people, including which items can be purchased (e.g., binders, packers, clothing, make-up, hair removal products, etc.).

**RECOMMENDATION 5**

Ensure young people receive appropriate and inclusive sexual health information.

The *Speaking OUT* report stressed the importance of young people receiving timely, appropriate, and inclusive sexual health information. Young people in government care often do not receive sexual health information from family, caregivers, or school due to placement moves and other disruptions.

The community discussions echoed what was highlighted in the Speaking OUT report. There were significant discussions around how to provide inclusive sexual health education. Many individuals acknowledged levels of discomfort in having sexual health conversations with young people, and not having the right tools to provide accurate information. In one community, it was suggested that sexual health education be part of a Transition to Independence Plan for young people receiving services through Children’s Services. Participants recommended that there be more individuals/services able to provide sexual health education to young people in the child welfare and youth justice systems. Resources noted in this area are the C.H.E.W. Project (Comprehensive Health Education Workers) through iSMSS\(^4\) and the Centre for Sexuality’s\(^5\) health training programs.

The community discussions brought forward the need to find safe spaces for young people to explore and access sexual health information online in foster homes, group homes, residential placements, and schools. Often online parental controls or school web blockers may prevent young people from accessing sexual health information.

Overall, it was agreed that young people require inclusive and comprehensive sexual health education that focuses on healthy relationships.

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“Children’s Services needs to focus on ensuring inclusive sexual health education is part of policy for kids in care.” – Stakeholder

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\(^4\) [https://www.ualberta.ca/ismss/community/chew-project](https://www.ualberta.ca/ismss/community/chew-project)

\(^5\) [https://www.centreforsexuality.ca](https://www.centreforsexuality.ca)
Conclusion/Final Thoughts

The community conversations added depth to the Speaking OUT report—they added to what we previously heard about the importance of young people’s identity, safety, the places they live, and their access to supports and services.

Those who attended community conversations walked away with a better understanding about the availability of resources and services in their community and how they can better support LGBTQ2S+ young people. The conversations provided a better understanding of the readiness, needs and resources within communities to support these young people.

During the conversations, we heard about ideas to better implement the recommendations made in the Speaking OUT report—for example, to have a point person who could assist employees in their learning and connections to resources. These ideas will be helpful to the systems responsible for implementing the recommendations.

The next steps are for the Ministry of Children’s Services and the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General to hear what communities had to say, work with young people and the resources within communities, and move forward the recommendations in Speaking OUT. There is an energy and willingness in Alberta to improve services for these young people, and great work is already happening in some communities, but more needs to be done. Communities are waiting for action and, more importantly, young people are waiting—waiting to feel accepted, safe and able to access the services and supports they need.
# Appendix A

What is the one thing you can take away from today’s session and implement in your workplace?

Here are a few of the responses we received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach this as an opportunity for educating staff and for honest, open, respectful conversations.</th>
<th>Create an obvious safe office space. Encourage consistent conversation within my office.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working harder to develop LGBTQ2S+ specific living options.</td>
<td>Review and solidify internal and external policies to protect the LGBTQ2S+ youth and people who utilize our services. Also incorporate those policies into the RFPs (Request for Proposals) and contacts we hold with all our partner organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can make it a habit to introduce my name and pronouns when I first meet clients so transgender clients don’t feel outed when I appear to only ask youth with “alternative” appearances their pronouns.</td>
<td>Ensure that HAR (Home Assessment Report) writers include young people’s development and explore their thoughts and feelings regarding LGBTQ2S+ (their: meaning foster parent applicants and new staff).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue telling my story and advocating change for myself and the youth who come after me.</td>
<td>I can connect more with the people and services that are working to improve the lives of LGBTQ2S+ youth. My agency can develop more policy throughout that protects LGBTQ2S+ youth/staff, and vocalize those policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not get complacent—continue to learn, grow and ensure our agency is doing the best it can. This is important!</td>
<td>Avoid outing youth to staff without clear permission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach out to other agencies in the community to see if they would like education/support around LGBTQ2S+ issues.</td>
<td>Review policies and create change recommendations, particularly surrounding training and hiring procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify myself as a safe person at every opportunity through word and action.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To look at how caseworkers can get more comfortable delivering or connecting to sexual health information.

Talk—open and honestly. Generate ideas on how we can become a safe organization. Operationalize the ideas to create a safe organization. Evaluate if our organization is safe. Put up a rainbow if we are safe.

We can ensure access to sexual health education for kids in care, regardless of when/how they join our system.

Create a more open environment. Have staff training specifically in LGBTQ2S+ community or have an advocate for youth. Integrate an LGBTQ2S+ liaison in agencies.

Incorporating LGBTQ2S+ training and conversations into our orientation to caregivers training and core training for foster parents.

Our agency can do more education on specific areas (i.e. landlords) to assist in creating more awareness and understanding and safer housing options.
Appendix B

A special thank you to the stakeholders who participated in our community meetings—we appreciate you and the work you are doing for the young people we serve.

**Calgary: (31 stakeholders)**

- The Alex
- Aspen Family and Community Network
- Burns Memorial Fund
- Calgary Board of Education
- Calgary John Howard Society
- Calgary Pride
- Calgary United Way
- Enviros
- Hull Services
- McMan Youth and Family Services
- Native Counselling Services of Alberta
- Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY)
- Wood’s Homes

**Edmonton: (42 stakeholders)**

- Alberta Health Services
- BGCBigs Edmonton and Area
- CHEW
- Chimo Youth Retreat Centre
- E4C
- Edmonton Pride Centre
- Homeward Trust
- iHuman Youth Society
- Inclusive Counselling & Consulting Psychological Services
- Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS)
- John Howard Society
- Métis Child and Family Services Society
- Nations of Treaty 8 Urban Child and Family Services Office
- Old Strathcona Youth Society
- The Family Centre
Grande Prairie: (38 stakeholders)

- Accredited Supportive Living Services
- Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General
- Ministry of Children’s Services
- City of Grande Prairie
- Community and Social Services
- Grande Prairie Friendship Centre
- High Prairie Youth Assessment Centre
- HIV North Society
- John Howard Society of Grande Prairie
- Mountain Plains CSSN
- Pace Community Support, Sexual Assault and Trauma Centre
- RCMP
- Summer’s House
- Sunrise House

Lethbridge: (36 stakeholders)

- Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General
- Ministry of Children’s Services
- 5th on 5th Youth Services
- Blood Tribe Child Protection
- Boys & Girls Club of Lethbridge – the MAT Youth Centre
- Chinook Arch Regional Library System
- Family Centre
- Horizon School Division and Family Ties Association
- Kainai Community Corrections
- Kainaiwa Children’s Services Corporation
- Lethbridge Family Services
- Lethbridge Pride Fest
- Lethbridge Public Library
- Lethbridge School District
- McMan Youth and Family Services - The Youth HUB
- Native Counselling Services of Alberta
- Opokaa’sin Early Intervention Society
- Siksika Nation
- Wood’s Homes
- W.R. Myers High School
- Youth One
- The YQueerL Society for Change and Lethbridge College
- YWCA
Red Deer: (26 stakeholders)

- Ministry of Children’s Services
- Ermineskin Cree Nation
- Heritage Family Services
- John Howard Society
- O’Chiese First Nation
- Red Deer Public School District – Alternative Schools Programs
- Trans and Non-Binary Aid Society (TANAS)
- Turning Point
- Unlimited Potential Community Services
- Vantage Community Services
- Youth HQ
Community Conversations on Speaking OUT:

Ideas for Taking Action