

# A Rainbow Retrospective

Reflecting on  
best practices and  
successes  
from the field



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Rainbow Welcome Initiative  
Cultivating Safe Spaces and Supportive Communities

# Acknowledgements

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Heartland Alliance International thanks all of the contributors from around the country who shared with us the successes of their teams and their LGBT program participants. We pay special thanks to our partners, Church World Service-Miami, Heartland Human Care Services (USCRI), and Nationalities Service Center (USCRI) for their steadfast efforts in supporting LGBT refugees and asylees; through staff trainings, specialized service provision, and social programming, these sites have created welcoming spaces in which LGBT refugees can thrive with dignity and in safety.

**“I’ve noticed lately that the resettlement agencies are handling [LGBT cases] in a very positive way compared to a few years back when I came. They are more aware that there are so many refugees who are LGBT. They’re more sensitive. I feel free. I can be me, I can express myself. I made my way, and I’m so glad I’m here. America is my home. It’s simply home.”**

—Transgender refugee from the Middle East

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# Introduction

In 2011, Heartland Alliance International (HAI) established the first ever national technical assistance program dedicated to improving the resettlement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) refugees, with the support of the US Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). When President Obama issued the December 2011 memorandum that called upon US government bodies to advance the human rights of LGBT persons globally, ORR was quickly at the forefront of ensuring protections for this vulnerable community and has continued to demonstrate its commitment to developing inclusive programs for LGBT refugees and asylees. In just the last couple years, we have seen an increase in staff capacity to resettle LGBT refugees, and a transformation in the network's understanding of and response to this population.

HAI staff traveled across the country to conduct workshops and lead regional training sessions for resettlement affiliates. The dedication among staff to provide a safe landing for all refugees, including LGBT refugees, is palpable and it is with this same focused passion that case managers, employment counselors, ESL instructors, and administrators have opened themselves up to learning more about the specific vulnerabilities LGBT refugees face as they resettle.

In addition to leading in-person workshops and presenting at conferences, HAI conducted a national quarterly webinar series entitled "Strengthening Services for LGBT Refugees and Asylees;" produced several short films highlighting the experiences of LGBT refugees and the efforts undertaken to support them; published a comprehensive field manual that offers practical guidance on how to resettle LGBT refugees; responded to technical assistance requests from agencies and providers; and directed refugees and asylees to appropriate resources and services.

From each voluntary agency (VOLAG), affiliates enthusiastically participated in Rainbow Welcome Initiative's trainings, dedicated to fulfilling their obligations to provide sensitive, culturally-competent care to each refugee who walks through their doors, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Staff members from different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and religious affiliations share a common vision that LGBT refugees will receive the services they need to carve out new lives, and create new homes and communities in which they feel safe and supported.

HAI was fortunate to work with several local partners that piloted projects benefiting LGBT refugees' integration. Church World Service-Miami, Heartland's Refugee and Immigrant Community Services (USCRI), and Nationalities Service Center (USCRI) served as partners in the second year of the Rainbow Welcome Initiative and demonstrated how simple steps taken can produce extraordinary outcomes. Other sites across the country have also reported success stories and we want to take this opportunity to recognize and share some of the Rainbow Welcome best practices at work. We invite you to read through this publication to learn about what other programs have done to support LGBT refugees and how your organization can take similar steps in strengthening services.

Heartland Alliance International is honored to have had the opportunity to contribute to resettlement agencies' shift in awareness and practices, and is eager for all the great work and success stories that still lie ahead.

# 1. Creating Safe Spaces

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LGBT refugees are reluctant to disclose information pertaining to their sexual orientation and gender identity when accessing services at their resettlement agency. Many of them fear continued discrimination and worry that self-identifying will result in harassment and denial of services.

Resettlement agencies are increasingly adopting innovative, cost-effective, and low-maintenance practices to ensure their offices are “safe spaces.” Simple steps taken can have a major impact on how comfortable and included LGBT refugees feel. By signaling to every participant and staff member who walks through the agency’s doors that all refugees are welcome, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, resettlement affiliates send a clear and powerful message that they support LGBT refugees, and that their offices are discrimination-free zones.

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“Self-disclosure can be difficult for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals, especially if they have been abused, tortured, or persecuted in their home country for being a member of the LGBT community. In the Church World Service (CWS) office, we have found that creating a safe, welcoming, and friendly environment is essential in encouraging the client to self-disclose. At CWS we understand the importance of building the trust of the client by establishing good and open communication, expressing compassion for the difficulties they may be facing, and by providing the best possible services to meet and exceed their needs.

At CWS Miami we prepare all our staff to assist LGBT clients by providing comprehensive training. Our staff has greater awareness of this hidden community and is better educated on the particular needs of this population.

We provide a confidential client/caseworker interview setting, thereby facilitating the opportunity for clients to self-disclose. We realize LGBT clients may not otherwise feel

comfortable sharing personal information when others are in the room. Additionally, at CWS sites we display LGBT friendly signage throughout the office and in our lobby, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere for our LGBT clients. The results of these efforts have been encouraging, as we have seen a significant spike in the number of individuals who openly identify as LGBT.

In October 2011, the CWS Miami office worked with a transgender (male-to-female) client. The Cuban native immigrated to Mexico in the late ‘90s in search of freedom. She resided in Mexico until the year 2010, at which time she petitioned for her family to come to Mexico. Once reunited with her family, the client continued her journey to the United States with her partner, minor-child, and elderly mother. They crossed the Mexico/Texas border at the end of 2011. Upon arrival in Miami, FL, she came to the CWS office with her family, and requested assistance. The client felt free to disclose that she was transgender early on in her interaction with the CWS senior caseworker, especially since the

caseworker was careful to use appropriate language, and made it clear to her that CWS was a welcoming environment and people will not face discrimination or bias. The CWS office then provided the client and her family with an orientation on services available to them. The client expressed interest in being resettled to one of our affiliate site locations which would facilitate their basic resettlement needs while providing a supportive environment and community. CWS Miami was in contact with the affiliate office that would be receiving them and it was agreed that the client would need to be resettled in an area that would be sensitive and welcoming to a member of the LGBT community. Shortly after, the client was resettled to a medium-sized city with her family, in which the local LGBT community was willing and able to volunteer and welcome

them. The client received housing, assistance in finding a school for her child, and assistance with job placement. She was connected to the LGBT Chamber of Commerce and LGBT Community Centers that were able to provide additional support. We are pleased to report a happy ending and a new beginning for this transgender client and her family as they begin their journey in the United States of America. We are glad that through our efforts in creating safe spaces, this client, and others like her, felt comfortable sharing such personal information. This allowed our organization to respond appropriately and ensure all of her social and medical needs were met.”

—Church World Service-Miami  
Miami, Florida

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### Tips for Providers:

- Develop a welcoming culture among all staff so program participants feel free to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Use appropriate language on intake forms, and during client interactions; allow new clients who may be transgender to communicate their pronoun preference.
- Create referral networks with legal service providers so that you can serve ORR populations of interest, such as asylees and Cuban entrants.
- Manage secondary migration by identifying key resources before the refugee moves.
- Most cities have LGBT chambers of commerce or community centers—use them!

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LGBT refugees also have physical safety concerns to which resettlement practitioners must be attentive. Same-sex couples are victims of intimate partner violence at the same rate as heterosexual couples. LGBT refugees however may be less likely to report such incidents due to linguistic barriers, the shame they attach to their sexual orientation/gender identity, or an unfounded fear that their immigration status will be jeopardized. LGBT and gender nonconforming adolescents are also at an elevated risk of violence. LGBT students and students who are perceived to be LGBT report experiencing discrimination and harassment on a daily basis; any bullying that occurs among youth participants must be taken seriously and addressed immediately, utilizing a team approach.

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*Resettlement affiliates are sending a clear and powerful message that they support LGBT refugees, and that their offices are discrimination-free zones.*

“We are working with a 25-year-old, self-identified gay Russian woman, who was referred from the hospital emergency department after treatment of injuries secondary to intimate partner violence. The client, Elena<sup>1</sup>, reported verbal, physical, emotional, and financial abuse by her girlfriend. She was socially isolated, not allowed to leave the apartment, and lost control over her inheritance money. Due to her history of abuse, she currently suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and clinical depression.

She moved to the United States several years ago in order to apply for asylum with her girlfriend, who is a survivor of gender-based violence. Even though they lived in San Francisco, Elena was kept isolated and was unable to obtain information on her rights or freely join the community. Elena felt stuck and stayed in the relationship with her abusive girlfriend out of fear that she would be deported back to Russia or face additional persecution if she contacted law enforcement.

To put Elena on a path of recovery, we focused on her safety and housing first, and then on psychological and psychosocial needs. We connected her to organizations that could help her file for a U-Visa (for immigrant victims of crime) as well as legal resources to get some of her financial resources back from the perpetrator. After initially addressing urgent case management needs, we have since discussed how the possibility of the discrimination she faced in Russia may have led to traumatic bonding which kept her in the abusive relationship for so long. We continue to process her traumatic experiences to help address her PTSD symptoms as well as explore ways to keep herself safe from harm in the future.”

— Survivors International/  
Trauma Recovery Center  
San Francisco, California

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#### **Tips for Providers:**

- Be aware and sensitive to the fact that LGBT asylum seekers and refugees may be at risk of manipulation, blackmail, or extortion due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is particularly true for single persons who may be dependent upon another for housing or income support.
- Intimate partner violence occurs among both straight and gay couples; be alert and responsive for intimate partner violence in all of your program participants. The risk is especially high for those in same-sex relationships as they may be more isolated due to lack of family support, and more likely to be emotionally or financially dependent upon just one other person.
- People cannot leave abusive relationships without alternatives to enable them to live safely, and without emotional support to allow them to come to terms with the abuse they have suffered. Torture treatment and refugee resettlement programs need to be able to provide both.
- Refugee resettlement agencies and torture treatment programs should become educated on U-visas and other remedies for immigrant victims of crime.

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<sup>1</sup> All names in this document have been changed to protect the individuals' identities.

## 2. Forming Community

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LGBT refugees often arrive alone and remain isolated upon resettlement. “Doubly marginalized,” they are excluded on the grounds of both their refugee and sexual minority statuses. While other refugee communities enjoy the support and friendships of those with whom they share a country of origin, LGBT refugees are typically segregated from their ethnic and national communities. They experience compounded discrimination, as newcomers to the United States, and as LGBT individuals.

The resettlement network’s overarching mission is to equip refugees with the tools they need to achieve self-sufficiency; social relationships and a sense of belonging are critical to refugees’ successful transition and cultural adjustment, as maintaining employment and housing are jeopardized when refugees have no support network. Developing opportunities for LGBT refugees to forge relationships with each other, while making efforts to integrate them within the larger refugee and immigrant community, sets the foundation for LGBT refugees to thrive in their new homes.

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“In our work with LGBT refugees, asylees, and asylum seekers, we found that individuals may not feel that they can safely connect with others who share a country of origin, ethnic heritage, or common language. Profound experiences of discrimination and violence in their country of origin results in many LGBT refugees preferring to avoid connections with others from the same country or culture. All LGBT refugees who have come through our program shared a common desire to connect with other LGBT individuals, both US citizens and other LGBT immigrants who share a similar migration story and history. LGBT refugees, asylees, and asylum seekers nearly all speak of a profound sense of isolation. To address this feeling, Nationalities Service Center (NSC) has worked in concert with participants to form an advisory group. The group was charged with identifying and

planning group social outings that were intended to reverse social isolation and help create community.

The participants helped develop social and community outings as a group. We view the process of planning an event equally important to participating in the actual outing. The group would come together and formally or informally choose where they would like to go. The process of planning enabled the group to develop a sense of identity, and gave them a forum to express their ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Many of our program participants are also torture survivors. The experience of torture takes away autonomy over one’s acts, and a structured venue in which to plan and organize events provides a sense of agency for torture survivors who too often feel powerless, and who may also suffer from debilitating



*They relished in being part of an LGBT group visiting a local cultural institution; they felt a great sense of acceptance and fondness for their new community.*

depression. Participants felt that seeing their ideas become concrete activities was empowering and transformative. The group has engaged in diverse activities: they've attended an LGBT community fair, attended a local roller derby, visited an art gallery featuring the work of a transgender artist, met for coffee in the 'gayborhood,' and took a tour of a large LGBT social service provider. They most recently took a trip to the Philadelphia Art Museum where group members relished in being part of an LGBT group visiting a local cultural institution; they felt a great sense of acceptance and fondness for their new community, and took special comfort in the fact that as a group of LGBT individuals, they could go to a public space like an art museum and participate without any stigma and without any risk of public disapproval or rejection.

From the community events grew the idea of forming an ESL conversation group where participants could meet and practice their English. The group now meets weekly and truly is an initiative that is participant driven. NSC provides a safe place and access to ESL materials of their choosing.

The frequency of the outings and meetings has increased from quarterly to now weekly, and we anticipate the group continuing to meet long after financial support ends to support NSC's role in the group."

—Nationalities Service Center (USCRI)  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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#### **Tips for Providers:**

- Treatment or service plans for LGBT refugees and asylees should include objectives related to the program participant's self-identified needs and interests in developing social support networks.
- LGBT refugees and asylees may have more in common with each other than with members of their own communities. To address isolation, strive to create a "critical mass" of LGBT refugees and asylees, which encourages more refugees and asylees to disclose or to come for services.
- Facilitate structured group activities for LGBT refugees and asylees, particularly for those who may be suffering from depression or PTSD and who may tend to self-isolate.

# 3. Collaborating with External Partners

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The needs of LGBT refugees comprise a complex web of resettlement, mental health, and legal services that cannot single-handedly be addressed by any one resettlement agency. LGBT refugees are disproportionately survivors of torture and consequently suffer from traumatic stress and depression, presenting severe obstacles in their cultural adjustment period. LGBT refugee survivors benefit from accessing services at a torture treatment program which can provide the tailored, intensive mental health services necessary to reduce psychological and emotional stress.

Just as resettlement agencies can expand the mental health services available to LGBT refugees by connecting them to torture treatment centers, agencies can reach more individuals by establishing and strengthening relationships with local legal service providers. Most LGBT program participants eligible for resettlement services are asylees, not refugees. These individuals are awarded asylum based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; while they are entitled to access services and resources from their local resettlement affiliates, many never do, in part because they remain unaware of the available benefits. By engaging lawyers who take on immigration cases, and informing them of the available benefits for their clients, resettlement agencies can expect to see greater numbers of asylees accessing services.

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“Heartland Alliance’s Refugee and Immigrant Community Services (RICS) strengthened partnerships with two other Heartland Alliance programs that are essential to meeting the needs of LGBT refugees and asylees. The Marjorie Kovler Center provides comprehensive and holistic services to survivors of torture. Participants can access medical, case management, and mental health services, join social activity groups, and receive individual and group therapy. RICS has developed formal mechanisms for cross-referrals with the Kovler Center to ensure LGBT individuals eligible for ORR services have a

wide array of opportunities to access different resources and assistance.

RICS also works closely with the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC), which provides direct legal services to asylum seekers. NIJC has a program specifically helping LGBT asylum seekers and has referred dozens of individuals to RICS for case management services once they’re awarded asylum.

In March 2013, a lesbian couple fled a Central African country because of persecution, including torture that they endured as a result of their sexual orientation. They first arrived



*The coordination between resettlement, mental health, and legal providers is critical to promoting the wellbeing of LGBT refugees and asylees. Communication between providers allowed us to provide continuity of trauma-informed care for individuals who would have otherwise been isolated.*

in a jurisdiction in the United States with the lowest asylum approval rate and some of the worst conditions for asylum applicants. They were arrested and held in detention for nearly six months, including occasionally in administrative segregation. NIJC and RICS were able to identify a volunteer in Chicago's LGBT community who was willing to offer housing for the couple for the duration of their case, enabling NIJC to petition to have the couple released from detention. They moved to Chicago and are now residing in this volunteer's home. Obtaining housing also allowed NIJC to transfer the asylum case to the jurisdiction of the Chicago immigration court, which thanks to adjudicating more than fifty NIJC sexual orientation and gender identity cases over the years, has developed greater sensitivity and a far better record of fairness toward LGBT asylum seekers. NIJC has never lost an LGBT asylum case once the organization has thoroughly vetted the individual and determined that the case has merit.

After arrival in Chicago, RICS met with the couple, helped them access medical care, and referred them to the Marjorie Kovler

Center, which is able to accept and provide services for torture survivors who are in the process of applying for asylum. The Kovler Center determined that the women had indeed suffered persecution rising to the US and international definition of torture, and accepted them as program participants.

Communication between RICS, Kovler Center, and NIJC, and support from LGBT volunteers in Chicago allowed us to provide continuity of trauma-informed care for individuals who would have remained in detention, and who would have otherwise been isolated and homeless even if released. RICS hosts social activities for its LGBT program participants, many of whom were referred by Kovler and NIJC. Though it may be rare to have these different services affiliated with the same organization, other cities host similar resources. We found that close coordination between resettlement, mental health, and legal services providers is critical to promoting the wellbeing of LGBT refugees and asylees."

—Heartland Human Care Services (USCRI)  
Chicago, Illinois

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#### **Tips for Providers:**

- More ORR-eligible LGBT program participants come through the asylum process than through refugee resettlement and placement. If you wish to develop a robust LGBT refugee/asylee program at your agency, develop a close, collaborative relationship with legal services providers—both non-profit and private attorneys—who handle LGBT asylum claims. Referral means more than simply handing someone a phone number and asking them to call. Follow up with providers and LGBT asylees who are referred to your organization to make sure that interested individuals attend their initial intake meeting.
- Refugee resettlement and torture treatment programs operate with limited resources and depend upon volunteers. It is necessary to vet, train, and supervise volunteers carefully, but programs can provide better services by reaching out to the LGBT community and identifying volunteer assets—for housing, but also medical, mental health, and legal services.
- Even if ORR-funded refugee resettlement programs cannot serve asylum seekers, torture treatment programs can—provided the individuals are survivors of torture. Even without dedicated funding, refugee resettlement agencies should be prepared to identify referral services and external resources to help meet the emergency needs of LGBT asylum seekers with urgent protection needs, as they may become eligible for ORR services in the future. In doing so, these individuals will certainly participate in programming once their refugee status is adjudicated.

# 4. Case Management Services

The services resettlement practitioners provide to LGBT refugees will be no different from the services delivered to other refugee communities; all refugees are in need of affordable and safe housing, appropriate employment, and health care, including both medical and mental health services. Although the basic level of services remains the same, individual services must be tailored to address concerns and needs particular to LGBT refugees. Just as caseworkers fine tune service plans based on the age, ethnicity, and nationality of program participants, the same approach can be applied to LGBT participants, taking into consideration the ways in which backgrounds and lived experiences inform resettlement needs.

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## A. Housing

For many refugees, living with someone who is from their country of origin is desirable; they share cultural traditions, values, and a common language, and the level of comfort that provides in an unfamiliar setting can be invaluable. For LGBT refugees, living with or in close proximity to members of their ethnic or national communities can trigger past traumatic events; in some cases, LGBT refugees may suffer continued discrimination and harassment. LGBT refugees often resettle alone but are still in need of roommates since the cost of rent is so high. While some LGBT residents may be able to live with roommates from their country of origin, others cannot. Resettlement agencies may need to think creatively and problem solve to ensure LGBT program participants feel safe and protected in their new accommodations.

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“We had an Iraqi client who identifies as gay and for whom we had difficulty in identifying a roommate. This client, Muhammad, had fled from Iraq to Jordan due to fear of religious persecution after being abducted for a short period. The client was severely and repeatedly persecuted because of his sexual orientation, though this was not the basis of his refugee claim. Upon his arrival in Chicago, he began receiving mental health care, along with employment and adjustment services from our agency.

Several months after his arrival, Muhammad's roommate out-migrated to another state and he needed someone else with whom to split the cost of rent. At the time, there was only one other Iraqi man who could serve as a potential roommate. Muhammad was not comfortable with him due to his perceived rejection of Mohammed's sexual orientation and concerns about disclosure in the Iraqi community. We applied to our national VOLAG—Church World Service/UMC (United Methodist Committee on Relief) and they were

able to provide us with two full months' of rental assistance, which afforded us and Muhammad enough time to find a suitable roommate. In the meantime, his brother arrived in Chicago, and they are now living together.

I would encourage local affiliates to reach out to their national organizations for potential funding resources if they encounter a similar situation. It is critical we do all that we can to ensure our clients feel safe and comfortable in their new homes. ”

—RefugeeOne (Church World Service)  
Chicago, Illinois

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### Tips for Providers:

- LGBT refugees and asylees may face discomfort, discrimination, or even violence if housed with others of the same nationality who are straight, or in housing facilities owned and operated by landlords who, for cultural or religious reasons, may be predisposed to discriminating against LGBT persons.
- Do not disclose a participant's sexual orientation or gender identity to a prospective roommate or landlord unless directed by the participant to do so.
- Agencies need to identify independent funds and budget for short-term housing so that staff can respond quickly in providing new housing options for LGBT clients who are at risk of discrimination or harassment, or who are unable to leave a housing situation due to economic dependence upon a roommate or partner. Lack of access to secure, safe housing increases vulnerability to abuse or violence.
- Transgender individuals face particular housing needs, and agencies should work with the local LGBT community to identify appropriate housing, and sympathetic landlords and roommates.

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## B. Employment

In their countries of origin, many LGBT refugees were fired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Others may have been employed in professions in the home or in private spaces where they were able to be safe, and may be reluctant to take employment in jobs involving public interaction. Some may not have been able to work in the formal sector at all and may have engaged in “survival sex” if they were denied the protection and support of family members. Accordingly, LGBT refugees and asylees may express reluctance or opposition to finding employment in the United States because they are afraid of experiencing continued discrimination in the workplace. While some US states have protections against discriminatory hiring and firing practices, many do not. It is important then for employment counselors to have a conversation with LGBT program participants to discuss any concerns and barriers, strategizing potential solutions. In states where the legal climate towards LGBT persons is unfavorable, resettlement affiliates can identify LGBT-friendly employers with whom to establish partnerships. Like any participant, if LGBT refugees are to thrive in their new jobs, they need to feel safe and supported.

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“Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA) recently resettled Michelle, a transgender refugee from Honduras. When Michelle came into the office for employment services, we made her feel at ease and welcomed. As a result, she felt comfortable disclosing her identity and sharing her thoughts and concerns. We collectively strategized with Michelle a plan to best help her in her job search. A lot of the preparatory work involved was standard; we worked with Michelle on editing her resume and facilitated a mock interview. As a transgender woman, Michelle had additional questions and concerns not shared by most of our other clients. How would people refer to her? What would she tell her employer? We agreed that she would be called Ms. per her request and we would introduce her to the employer in that way. We talked about why she shouldn't feel ashamed and that this was who she

wanted to be moving forward. We found an administrative position which she was qualified for and set up an interview. Michelle aced the interview, was hired, and has been happily working for over a month! She loves what she does and is well liked and respected by her coworkers. A week into her job, she called just to tell us how happy she was and that everyone was treating her very well. She mentioned that before, she would never have had the courage to step out and live her life as a woman in the workplace. We feel honored to have played a part in her successful adjustment and are thrilled that our support and guidance helped her find the courage to be herself in her new home.”

—Lutheran Social Services of the  
National Capital Area (LIRS)  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*We feel honored to have played a part in her successful adjustment and are thrilled that our support and guidance helped her find the courage to be herself in her new home.*

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### **Tips for Providers:**

- Cultivate relationships with potential employers who will maintain and enforce a non-discriminatory, safe workplace.
- Take a strengths-based approach to identifying work. In the example above, the client was placed in an office environment with a limited number of other workers who would be supportive of her, in a position that enabled her to take advantage of her organizational and communications skills.
- Attempt to identify employment opportunities in which the program participant can disclose his/her sexual orientation or gender identity safely, but do not push self-disclosure.
- Be sensitive to the subjective fears of LGBT program participants, but also be supportive and persistent in job placement. LGBT refugees may never have experienced living and working in a society where their gender identity or sexual orientation is accepted in the workplace and in which they are free to develop friendships unencumbered by fear. Besides providing an income, a healthy working environment is of great therapeutic value to LGBT refugees and asylees who may otherwise have limited social networks and support.
- Be aware that sometimes workplace discrimination or threats really do happen and that “subjective fear” may be rooted in a valid and accurate assessment of risk. As is the case with housing, be flexible and be prepared to help LGBT refugees and asylees switch jobs quickly if there is a credible risk to the individual from co-workers or supervisors.

# 5. Leveraging Support from the LGBT Community

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Over the last three decades, members of the LGBT community in the United States have formed a vibrant and active network of organizations in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and the movement for equality. There are parallels between LGBT and refugee communities as they share many challenges, needs, and goals of minority populations facing discrimination. Refugee resettlement agencies can build upon this pre-existing infrastructure to educate US citizens and cultivate new resources. The refugee resettlement network has historically benefited from public-private partnerships to expand the resources and assistance available to refugees and asylees. Connection to external LGBT community organizations can be a source of strength and empowerment for LGBT refugees, who often have minimal access to support systems outside the resettlement agency. Resettlement agencies and LGBT organizations can strategize ways to collaborate and leverage resources. Building on each other's strengths and resources, these groups can join efforts to advance the rights of and improve conditions for marginalized populations here in the United States and overseas.

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“Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta (RRISA) is proud to offer a safe space that welcomes LGBT refugees and asylees in Georgia. To better support the LGBT population, RRISA built strategic partnerships with LGBT organizations, such as the Health Initiative and Atlanta Pride. We co-hosted a successful LGBT awareness event with Atlanta Pride around Stonewall week and World Refugee Day in June 2012. Since June is typically Gay Pride Month, we called the event “Taking Pride in World Refugee Day.” LGBT community members, and staff from different community organizations attended the event, where we first watched the documentary “Welcome to Shelbyville,” a film about a community of White and African-American residents negotiating changing demographics as growing Latino and Somali refugee populations emerge. The film was shown to spark dialogue about

LGBT refugees integrating in their new homes, community responses, and the role individuals can play in promoting greater tolerance and understanding. The event was followed by a brief presentation from a LGBT refugee and ended with a vibrant dance and musical performance by MBondAfrika, a troupe from the Dominican Republic of Congo. By heightening awareness of the social integration challenges facing LGBT refugees and asylees, we began to build a bridge—one that will welcome this vulnerable community into an often unwelcoming state.

In addition to our partnership with Atlanta Pride, we have also set up a regular sexual health workshop facilitated by the Feminists Women's Health Center; these workshops are appropriate for all clients and are inclusive of LGBT participants. RRISA has also worked with the Trans Health Initiative and has referred



*By heightening awareness of the social integration challenges facing LGBT refugees and asylees, we began to build a bridge—one that will welcome this vulnerable community into an often unwelcoming state.*

several clients to their services. In an effort to connect with LGBT friendly employers, RRISA has collaborated with the Georgia LGBT Chamber of Commerce. By forging these new relationships with LGBT organizations, we are exponentially expanding the support available

to our LGBT clients and connecting them to the resources they need to achieve self-sufficiency.”

—Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta (CWS, EMM)  
Atlanta, Georgia

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#### **Tips for Providers:**

- Most major communities in the United States have specialized health care providers that focus on the needs of the LGBTQ community. Establish a referral relationship with them in advance so that you are able to make referrals for medical and reproductive health needs, but also provide training and mentorship on cultural sensitivity.
- The LGBT community in the United States has its own distinctive culture, which may be very different from that of LGBT refugees and asylees. Resettlement agencies should be aware that some LGBT refugees may not feel comfortable with attending events or obtaining services through domestic LGBT organizations, at least initially.
- Find ways of integrating refugee awareness into Pride celebrations and other events in the LGBT community, as this creates new communities of support for refugees—whether they are LGBT or straight. It also creates the possibility of recruiting new volunteers, donors, and contacts for employment and housing, all of which benefit resettlement agencies and torture treatment programs.

# 6. Engaging Communities of Faith

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Faith communities have been at the forefront of social justice efforts and have often taken a stand against injustice, oppression, and discrimination, supporting those most vulnerable. Whether it is the local church connecting volunteers to new families, the neighborhood mosque welcoming participants in its place of worship, or a faith-based resettlement agency providing critical direct services, communities and people of faith are integral to a refugee's successful transition to life in the United States. Many religious communities openly affirm and welcome LGBT individuals and even more are quick to support LGBT refugees whose human rights have been violated because of who they inherently are.

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“The LGBT Faith & Asylum Network (LGBT-FAN) is a national coalition dedicated to helping people who are seeking safety in the United States because of persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity in their home countries. The network is primarily committed to supporting asylum seekers, most of whom will eventually be eligible for ORR services.

LGBT-FAN is composed of faith and community leaders, asylum seekers and people who have already gained asylum, LGBT rights activists, priests and pastors, policy experts, scholars, refugee resettlement professionals, and foundation representatives who feel called to support LGBT asylum seekers. Many of us are motivated by our spiritual traditions, which instruct us to welcome the stranger, seek justice, and provide a helping hand to those who are in need.

Many of the Network's members began to help LGBT asylum seekers before the creation of LGBT-FAN. While those in the refugee resettlement and policy advocacy fields knew of one another's work and had already begun to collaborate, many others were not aware of

efforts that were happening in different parts of the country, or resources that were available. Churches in different parts of the country and beyond had independently developed programs, for example, without knowing that others existed.

The Network remains unincorporated and entirely staffed by volunteers. While we are continuing to learn from one another and plan, we have determined our basic strategies and begun to see results. Our strategies include offering mutual encouragement and a sense of community to members; providing a forum for continuing education; sharing information and resources via the Internet; making introductions between people who can help, and people who need support; educating the LGBT community and others about the needs of asylum seekers and how they can help; educating immigration and refugee professionals about the LGBT community; and providing new ways for donors to help LGBT asylum seekers. The Network has already begun to offer educational opportunities and a sense of community to participants, and it has served as a forum for developing and sharing best practices, in addition to operating as a referral network for those in need.



In the coming year, the Network intends to formalize its operations by developing bylaws and policies, determining how to define and expand its membership, and forming a relationship with a fiscal agent. The Network will also begin to operate as an information resource through its website ([www.lgbt-fan.org](http://www.lgbt-fan.org)) and establish a fund to support the basic living expenses of LGBT asylum seekers. The fund will seek donations primarily from individual donors, and will provide grants to faith and community groups which will then spend the money on asylum seekers' rent, food, transportation costs, and so on. The LGBT-FAN network meets the needs of LGBT persons at risk before they access services and assistance through refugee resettlement agencies. Through this project, we have

seen the value and necessity of facilitating collaboration between diverse faith groups and refugee advocates. It is important we remember that many LGBT asylum seekers, asylees, and refugees are persons of faith; when we tap into the passion, mobilization capacity, and resources of faith partners, our communities are stronger, the level of support we offer expands, and LGBT newcomers' connections and friendships grow."

For more information, please contact Max Niedzwiecki, Ph.D. at [max@daylightconsulting.net](mailto:max@daylightconsulting.net)

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### Tips for Providers:

- Networks of LGBT-affirming churches, temples, and mosques exist throughout the country. LGBT refugees who are interested in practicing their faith will benefit from attending services at a place of worship that accepts, honors, and celebrates their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Search for places of worship at: [www.welcomingresources.org/usa.htm](http://www.welcomingresources.org/usa.htm)
- Some LGBT refugees and asylees were persecuted by their religious communities and may have reservations accessing support or services from a religious organization or place of worship. Providers should assess the comfort of participants and the orientation/messaging of faith partners to ensure LGBT refugees will feel safe.
- Religious organizations or groups that feel conflicted about supporting LGBT refugees should view Heartland Alliance International's film "A Religious Call to Action." Condemnation of LGBT persons is never universal within a particular faith tradition. This short film highlights the ways in which clergy and resettlement workers from different religious backgrounds feel spiritually compelled to support their LGBT brothers and sisters.

# Conclusion

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LGBT refugees share the same needs, culture, and histories with other refugees of the same nationality. However, they also present unique challenges for resettlement agencies. The risks and threats that caused most refugees to flee their homelands disappear upon arrival to the United States, although the physical and psychological wounds may persist for a lifetime. For LGBT refugees, the fears may persist, and are often based on actual discrimination and threats. Some LGBT refugees may continue to feel displaced long after arriving at their resettlement location, and sometimes migrate a second time, seeking a permanent home in a supportive community. The Rainbow Welcome Initiative is intended to mitigate these risks and increase the likelihood that LGBT refugees will feel safe and supported regardless of where they are first resettled.

Although LGBT refugees present resettlement agencies with many challenges, they also provide unique opportunities. Working with LGBT refugees helps refugee resettlement agencies create more flexible, client-focused strategies that improve resettlement outcomes, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Employment programs that are able to place transgender refugees in stable supportive jobs find themselves better prepared to assist refugees with other workplace vulnerabilities. Resettlement agencies that cultivate relationships with LGBT community organizations discover that they have new health care providers, volunteers, housing resources, and allies for advocacy that they might otherwise never have had. Agencies that are more informed and engaged in providing services for LGBT refugees are likely to be more prepared to identify and respond to family violence among program participants as well.

We hope that this best practices document helps provide resettlement agencies with ideas on how to make their programs more responsive to LGBT refugees, and by extension, more agile in addressing the needs of all refugees. We encourage readers to download and use the Rainbow Response manual, and to visit our website at [www.rainbowwelcome.org](http://www.rainbowwelcome.org) for more resources. Resettlement agencies have a unique responsibility to help refugees transition to becoming new Americans, accepting and embracing the personal freedoms and diversity that continue to make our nation a favored destination for persons fleeing persecution around the globe.

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