

5.4 OZONE HOUSE: LGBTQ2S INCLUSIVE EMERGENCY SERVICES

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Introduction

Ozone House is a community-based nonprofit agency located in Ann Arbor, Michigan that helps young people aged 10 to 21 lead safe, healthy and productive lives through intensive intervention and prevention services. Since 1969, we have actively developed unique, high-quality housing, services and support programs that provide intervention, training and services for youth who have run away, are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, and their families. Through these support services, we help youth develop essential life skills, improve their relationships and enhance their self-image so they may realize their full potential for growth and happiness.

Since the early 1970s, Ozone House has reached out to and provided support for LGBTQ2S youth. Mirroring national statistics, at any given time, between 20–35% of youth who come to Ozone House identify as LGBTQ2S. Because not all youth at Ozone House identify as LGBTQ2S, we prioritize policies that promote inclusion for LGBTQ2S people, as well as policies and practices that ensure *all* youth and adults develop the skills necessary to reinforce equity and inclusion of all intersectional identities.

Ozone House does not approach this work in a vacuum; the historical context of violence, dehumanization and oppression that LGBTQ2S youth have faced is an ever-present consideration for the environment we create at Ozone House, and for understanding and mitigating these experiences that youth and their families have faced. As such, Ozone House bears a special responsibility to advocate for LGBTQ2S youth in the broader community and to soften the context in which LGBTQ2S youth live, work and interact with others. Providing services that help youth lead safe, healthy, and productive lives is our primary mission. To achieve this mission effectively for LGBTQ2S youth, we focus on four critical components: our responsibilities as an organization, the environment at Ozone House, community education and advocacy, and provision of exceptional services, supports and opportunities.

Responsibilities of Ozone House

Be Visible

In the early 1970s, some gay teens—primarily young men—participated in a support group at Ozone House. Fearful for their lives if anyone found out about their sexual orientation, they communicated about the meetings in a covert way, leaving notes about the dates and times of meetings under rocks. Group members would periodically check the rocks for updates. While our current support group for LGBTQ2S youth, *PrideZone*, posts meeting dates and locations publicly, we continue to honour and fiercely protect confidentiality for all youth. However, we want to be a visible beacon for LGBTQ2S youth to know where to turn for support, which is why we always identify ourselves as an organization where LGBTQ2S youth are welcome. Perhaps equally important, we make a point of being visible in the community as a way of standing up for LGBTQ2S youth, and as a declaration that LGBTQ2S youth are present in the community and deserve award-winning services, opportunities and supports.

Provide Unfettered Access to Support, Services and Opportunities

Wherever LGBTQ2S youth are, we want them to be able to access Ozone House with no barriers. To do so, we hire youth to reach out to their peers on the street, in schools and wherever youth hang out, to connect them with services in the community to meet their needs. Our crisis line is answered by a person 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Youth can come to both our Drop-In Center when it is open and to our emergency shelter at any time without prior notice or referral. We send staff to every middle and high school in the community, and we have a presence at the local community college and at a local university. We provide Ozone House literature and updates to first responders, youth-serving professionals, educators, faith communities, youth-friendly businesses, health care facilities, courts, juvenile detention centers and LGBTQ2S resource centers at all colleges and universities, as well as in the community. We have a presence on social media, including our mobile-responsive website, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and youth can access us through each of those platforms.

Partner with other Organizations to Leverage Core Competencies

Ozone House's core competency is cultivating leaders in social justice and youth development in a trauma-informed environment. Because we do not provide every service that LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness need, we rely on partner organizations to provide their core competencies to help position LGBTQ2S youth for success. We

will not formally partner with any organization that does not support LGBTQ2S youth. Examples of successful partnerships include: our local food rescue and food bank that provides most of the food for our programs; a local nonprofit housing developer to manage housing properties where we place LGBTQ2S youth; a local teen health center that provides nonjudgmental services and has particular competence in health care for transgender and gender-expansive youth; and a local teen center that hosts an LGBTQ2S youth-led advocacy group.

Environment at Ozone House

Safety

Physical and psychological safety is a hallmark of Ozone House. Safety is especially important for LGBTQ2S youth because so many have experienced high rates of bullying, family rejection, violence and exploitation. Creating a culture of safety and inclusion for all youth requires that we train all youth to function safely in the environment, and hold all youth accountable—all the time—to strict standards of safety and inclusion. We train all youth to understand the value of inclusion, especially for LGBTQ2S youth who traditionally have been marginalized and not offered leadership opportunities.

Recruit, Screen, Hire, Train and Support Staff and Volunteers to Maintain an Environment of Safety and Inclusion for LGBTQ2S Youth

We specifically request that qualified LGBTQ2S members of the community consider applying for volunteer positions or employment at Ozone House. When screening prospective employees and volunteers, we use a lens of LGBTQ2S inclusion and affirmation, and require candidates to demonstrate the competencies necessary to support LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness and those who have been traumatized. Once we bring new people into the organization, we provide additional training in LGBTQ2S youth work that caters to multiple learning styles. To foster a culture of accountability, we reinforce cultural humility and open communication between supervisors and staff, and encourage open discussion of lessons learned. These are difficult conversations that can be fraught with fear, shame, and sometimes self-righteous indignation that serves to shut down communication. It is incumbent upon everyone at Ozone House to push through what is uncomfortable in order to create authentic safety.

For example, recently a member of our leadership team acknowledged to the full staff that she had made a mistake in language she chose when requesting that a group of people identify which pronouns they use. The practice of asking everyone to identify their pronouns helps avoid the misgendering of people through inaccurate pronoun use. This leader had asked a group to name their “preferred pronouns” as opposed to their “pronouns.” (The use of “preferred” implied that gender identity is a choice.) To highlight the mistake as a lesson learned and reinforce that every one of us still has much to learn, the leader took responsibility for the misstep in front of the entire staff. This choice also reinforced that it is not only important to take responsibility for errors, but also possible to move forward after making a mistake.

***Uphold Policies, Procedures and Practices that Create and Maintain
an Environment of Safety and Inclusion for LGBTQ2S Youth***

Our operations incorporate several policies that specifically support LGBTQ2S youth and their intersectional identities and enable the most impactful services and supports for LGBTQ2S youth.

Our Hostile Language Policy reads: *We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and seek to ensure that youth experience Ozone House as a safe place, free from bigotry and injustice, where each person is respected and affirmed. To this end, we commit ourselves to addressing hostile, discriminatory, and anti-social remarks and behaviour that threaten the safety of youth, staff, and others. Similar to all our work with youth, we will address these behaviours in a caring, patient, and non-judgmental manner with the goal of creating internalized awareness and change.*

Enforcement of a policy like this comes as a welcome surprise for LGBTQ2S youth, who have endured a lot of bullying and name-calling.

Recognizing that disclosing information about one’s personal identity to clients always has consequences, Ozone House developed a lengthy self-disclosure policy, the preamble of which is excerpted here. To maintain the youth-focused nature of services and appropriate professional boundaries with youth, Ozone House’s Policy on Self-Disclosure directs staff to avoid personal disclosure in interactions with clients except: when it has been deemed integral to the therapeutic plan with a client; and in specific instances where to deflect or deny one’s personal identity may damage rather than protect the rapport, comfort, and authenticity of the professional relationship between staff and clients. We developed this

policy to include the potential for appropriate self-disclosure so that youth could come to know LGBTQ2S staff members. This benefits LGBTQ2S youth, who have had limited exposure to LGBTQ2S people, and it allows them to identify with safe adults.

We have a blanket ‘No Physical Contact’ Policy in all our programs (though exceptions are made for youth who style each other’s hair). This policy is upheld for the physical and psychological safety of all youth, the majority of whom have experienced physical or sexual abuse and exploitation. LGBTQ2S youth have witnessed their non-LGBTQ2S peers engaging in public displays of affection without experiencing formal or informal consequences. In contrast, nearly all LGBTQ2S youth have experienced negative consequences based on their perceived identity when they engaged in public displays of affection with a romantic partner. Therefore, like the hostile language and self-disclosure policies, our policy on physical contact protects LGBTQ2S youth from the potential for differential treatment in this area, since all youth are expected to follow the same policies. That said, it is important to note that equal treatment does not always mean equitable treatment, and we strive for equity in our programming. Our working definition of equity is: Giving everyone what they need to be successful. We differentiate equity from equality, which is treating everyone the same. The focus of equality is to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same resources. Because of a legacy of discrimination, violence, hate crimes, dehumanization and oppression, LGBTQ2S youth do not ‘start from the same place’ as their peers. LGBTQ2S youth of colour experience additional layers of oppression.

As such, we operate with multiple inclusion practices and policies, including using inclusive language on all our paperwork, written communication, social media posts and verbal exchanges with youth. We expect all youth (and staff) in our programs to use updated, inclusive language when referencing sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and expression, and romantic and sexual attraction, as well as other identities. We ask about and use youths’ gender pronouns and preferred names. All bathrooms are gender inclusive; indeed, the bathrooms are all private, and require no signage. After much advocacy with our licensing representative (and with new United States Department of Housing and Urban Development policy), our sleeping rooms are also gender inclusive.

***Implement Best Practices and Theoretical Approaches
that Affirm Intersectional Identities of Adolescents***

All our services are informed by a Positive Youth Development framework. Based on the literature, the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, a collaboration of 12 [United States] federal departments and agencies that support youth, has created a definition of positive youth development:

Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d.).

At the most basic level, we require all volunteers and staff to engage in active listening and to speak and act in a non-judgmental manner when interacting with youth and with each other. Not only is this a best practice for working with youth experiencing homelessness, we have found that youth have woefully limited experience with adults who listen and treat them respectfully. A lack of respect for their identities sends a deep and painful message to LGBTQ2S youth that they do not matter, and often encourages them to turn away from all adults to protect themselves. A sense of self, identity development and mattering are primary tasks of adolescent development, as is relationship-building. Active, non-judgmental listening is the foundation of creating an environment to affirmatively support LGBTQ2S youth, and youth of colour.

Similarly, all our services are trauma informed, which means we emphasize:

- Safety;
- Trustworthiness, authenticity and transparency;
- Helping youth place their traumas in context;
- Youth voice and youth choice;
- Collaboration and mutuality;
- Consistently assessing the impact of trauma, as well as cultural and historical realities across intersecting identities;
- Instilling genuine hope;
- Supporting and promoting positive, stable, reciprocal relationships.

Ozone House operationalizes these components in several ways, most notably in our approach to developing trauma-informed consequences when upholding safety and agency rules. There is an inherent tension between upholding a consistent structure and responding to each individual's needs in the moment. Structure and consistency help youth feel safe. However, too much focus on 'rules' can minimize the needs of a young person—sometimes to traumatic effect—and can neglect to consider a youth's unique developmental functioning or historical experiences with authority and oppression. Balancing structure and clear limits with a tailored response is at the heart of Ozone House's approach. In addition, when staff identities differ from a youth's identities, we name the added power differential and the impact this has on a youth's experience.

Trauma-informed consequences are most evident in our approach when youth display unsafe behaviour to such point that we need to restrict their access to the physical buildings in order to ensure safety for other participants. In such cases, youth are supported to stay in touch with Ozone House staff, including meeting in public places, until the youth has made progress on the issues that led to their unsafe behaviour. In short, Ozone House does not remove the most important aspect of a youth's healing; namely, their relationships with caring adults. Instead we directly provide, or help them access, services that meet their developmental needs and help them make safer choices. More often than not, these youth return safely and become more engaged in leadership opportunities than ever before. This approach meets the sometimes competing needs of the individual youth and the larger group. It is important that LGBTQ2S youth witness staff holding youth accountable for unsafe behaviour, including discriminatory behaviour. This trauma-informed approach holds youth accountable for their actions, and supports them to make appropriate and safe choices in the future.

Likewise, we use a harm reduction approach when framing options for youth and supporting them to make safe and appropriate choices. This framework is applicable to youth who are focused on their very survival each day. Using empathy, we support youth to slow down, weigh their options, and make choices that are less harmful than other options. One example is that traumatized youth often engage in self-harming activities. Staff use a harm reduction approach when they recognize and name that cutting is less harmful than attempting suicide, for example. Another use of harm reduction that is salient for LGBTQ2S youth is around sexually transmitted disease and HIV prevention, sex, sex work and hormone therapies. It is important not to reduce LGBTQ2S identities to sexual behaviour or gender identity, but it is equally important to provide safe, accurate

information and options. Few LGBTQ2S youth have had access to accurate sexuality education, so it is incumbent on Ozone House to stay informed, and to share clear, correct and sex-positive information with LGBTQ2S youth.

Community Education and Advocacy

Educate the Community

To soften the context in which LGBTQ2S youth live, we educate the broader community about LGBTQ2S youth. We do so by exposing the community to stories of triumphs and traumas that LGBTQ2S youth experience. We have found that most people in the community lack exposure to LGBTQ2S people, both their contributions to the community and the tremendous barriers they face in leading safe, healthy and productive lives. In some cases, this lack of exposure is the result of willful ignorance or bigotry. In many other cases, however, people simply don't know what they don't know. We take the opportunity to educate them whenever possible, including within the school systems, legal system, parent groups, collaborative associations and faith communities. Additionally, we use our social media platforms to educate about LGBTQ2S youth issues; while many in our 'audience' identify as LGBTQ2S, we do reach a large segment of the population unfamiliar with the needs of LGBTQ2S youth, and we use the opportunity to highlight information, stories, statistics and ways to help.

Advocate for Change

Regarding the barriers that LGBTQ2S youth—especially LGBTQ2S youth of colour—face, Ozone House works to soften the community context by advocating for changes in attitudes, behaviours and policies that impact LGBTQ2S youth negatively. In our licensed shelter, for example, we have successfully advocated for the affirming placement of transgender youth who seek shelter. State of Michigan Licensing Rule R 400.4177 (3) for Child Caring Institutions stipulates: *Residents of the opposite sex over 5 years of age shall not sleep in the same sleeping room.* Our licensing representative interprets this rule so that sex means sex assigned at birth. When interpreted thus, this rule conflicts with federal, local, and Ozone House's nondiscrimination policies, which prohibit us from discriminating based on gender identity. We requested a variance from this rule for the occasions when a young person is in transition from their sex assigned at birth to the gender with which they identify. We requested and were granted the discretion to make decisions about sleeping room placements in such cases. If we cannot place youth in

the bedroom of the gender with which they identify, they face discrimination based on their gender identity. They also face the possibility of being outed involuntarily by the very place that is charged with making them safe. Creating and maintaining a safe and supportive place is Ozone House's highest responsibility to youth, to their families, to our community and to our funders. All staff and volunteers at Ozone House advocate for the rights of LGBTQ2S youth in multiple settings, including schools, health care facilities, housing placements and jobs.

In 2016, Donald Trump and Mike Pence were elected to the offices of President and Vice President of the United States, respectively. Mike Pence spent much of his political career supporting 'conversion therapy' for LGBTQ2S people, as well as laws that discriminate against LGBTQ2S people. Shortly after the election, we received a donation to our Kicked Out Fund, which supports our LGBTQ2S-specific services. The donation was given in honour of Mike Pence. As is our custom, we notified the honouree of the donation, and we took the opportunity to advocate for LGBTQ2S youth by circulating the letter as an open letter on social media and our website. Parts of the letter are excerpted here:

*Imagine for a moment how distracted your children were when they were hurt. Or when they were afraid. No doubt you and their mother reached out to comfort and love them in their time of distress so that they could confidently move forward. More importantly, though, imagine the foundation of love, safety, and health that you had **already** provided them that **already** enabled them to move through the world without ever having to wonder whether they would have a place to sleep or a meal. Without knowing your family personally, I suspect that you instilled in them the assurance that they could achieve whatever they set their minds to accomplish.*

*Not all citizens of this country are born into that foundation of family, or of faith—that foundation of not having to struggle just to meet basic needs of shelter, food, or clothing. Not all families are as welcoming of their LGBTQ2S children as you were of your own children. Young people who come to Ozone House are teenagers, who, in a country as magnificent as ours, **should** have the opportunity to build and dream about happy and productive futures from a safe and healthy foundation. Instead, these remarkable young people focus all their energy on mere survival; their future plans and dreams are sublimated to the imperatives of finding a safe place to sleep, or a meal to eat.*

Imagine, for a moment, that all young people in this country were provided the vital, life-giving support, safety, and affirmation that you never thought twice about providing for your children—the kind of foundation that your parents provided for you.

*Since [the 2016 U.S. presidential election on] November 8th, hate crimes have spiked precipitously, including against LGBTQ2S people. When people are forced to live and operate from a place of fear, they cannot contribute all their talent to this great country of ours. Imagine if you, as Vice President of the United States of America, could reinforce the dignity and worth of **all** people in this country. Imagine if you could assure **all** youth of their safety and capacities, the way you undoubtedly have reassured your own children for decades.*

*Against conventional wisdom and evidence to the contrary, I am taking a leap of faith to imagine you standing up and declaring that there is no room in this country for hatred, violence, bigotry, or denigrating people based on their identity. I said at the outset that this letter is not one of protest, but rather of invitation. I invite you to take a similar leap of faith and **protect all of your fellow citizens from the deleterious effects of hatred and bigotry with the same vigor you have protected your own family.***

Train Youth-Serving Professionals

Advocacy is an imperative component of our work, but we also hope to be effective ‘further upstream’ by training professionals who work with youth. We provide training on LGBTQ2S youth for educators, child welfare and juvenile justice workers, other social service providers such as the Girl Scouts and community centers, employers, child advocates, health care providers and funders of youth services. As meticulous as we are at Ozone House about creating a safe and affirming environment, we are but one small environment where LGBTQ2S youth gather. As such, we attempt to expand the places where LGBTQ2S youth can feel safe and affirmed, and where they can access important services, supports and opportunities.

Gather the Community to Support LGBTQ2S Youth

Each year we host a fundraiser specifically for our services for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. In addition to raising money for the organization, we hold the fundraiser for this specific population to educate the community that LGBTQ2S youth have individual needs. We also partner with two other youth-serving organizations who support LGBTQ2S youth to host a performance piece in which LGBTQ2S artists tell their personal stories. These events have two additional and important benefits: they provide a platform and venue for advocates to draw energy from each other and gain momentum to make change in the community; and they provide a space where LGBTQ2S youth can witness many community members—primarily adults—come together to support and affirm them. These events are powerful opportunities to instill hope.

Emergency Response Services

Here are three vignettes describing youth who access the services of Ozone House, followed by a description of emergency supports we provide and how these meet specific needs, as well as how they could meet the needs of the youth highlighted in the vignettes:

Titus – It’s 10:00 p.m. and 15-year-old Titus has just used the word ‘pansexual’ to identify themselves to their parent. To many at the colleges and universities that dot the landscape of the Ann Arbor area, this term rolls off the tongue as easily as ‘fraternity’ or ‘sorority.’ But to Titus’ mother, who has spent a lifetime trying to protect Titus from the trauma of racism, the vagaries of the streets and the disorientation of housing instability, ‘pansexual’ does not roll off the tongue. Instead, what screeches off the tongue is: “Get out. Get out of my house with that language.”

Jamie – It’s 4:00 p.m., and although their paper is due tomorrow, 16-year-old Jamie has not started writing. The school social worker called Jamie’s parent again today, worried about Jamie, who seems withdrawn and depressed. Jamie is not talking, and that is fine with Jamie’s mother. Her husband has taunted Jamie multiple times for “acting like a damn faggot” and has hinted that Jamie is no longer welcome in the house. Jamie’s mother begs Jamie to take off the make-up and high heels before their stepfather gets home.

Maria – It’s 7:00 a.m., and Maria is hungry, tired and almost out of money. At age 20, Maria has nowhere to go, and hasn’t had a place to live since age 15 when she left her last foster home. She could go back to her grade 11 teacher’s house, but she doesn’t like her teacher “like that” anymore. Her teacher wants to marry Maria, now that it is legal for two women to get married, but Maria prefers the independence that sex work offers, even though it is dangerous.

To help youth like Titus, Jamie and Maria lead safe, healthy and productive lives, Ozone House provides a continuum of services, opportunities and supports, ranging from brief interactions on our 24-hour crisis line or Drop-In Center to permanent supportive housing. These services are designed so that LGBTQ2S youth can reach out or drop in at any time and engage with whichever service they want and need to access.

Street Outreach

Our Street Outreach team consists of peer outreach workers and their supervisor. The team engages street-involved youth through conversation, crisis intervention, referral and prevention information, and survival kit distribution. In addition to the peer outreach workers, we hire a group of *PrideZone* (LGBTQ2S Support Group) participants to reach out to LGBTQ2S youth and educate the community.

We hope Titus, Jamie and Maria were three of the 2,500 youth that our Outreach Workers meet in the community each year.

24-Hour Crisis Line

All calls are confidential, unless the caller is in danger of hurting themselves, or is being hurt by someone else. Crisis intervention counselling is also provided on a walk-in basis at both our main site and Drop-In Center. Youth are able to call the crisis line for one-time crisis intervention, multiple times for support, or to schedule more intensive services. All crisis counsellors are trained in the needs of LGBTQ2S youth.

Titus, Jamie and Maria could use our telephone crisis line at any time, day or night.

The Drop-In Center

Here we offer regular activities and groups, hot meals, showers, laundry facilities, job information, crisis intervention services, counselling and case management, and intakes—all free of charge and voluntary. Youth are safe, welcome and comfortable, and free to express their identities in an affirming environment. Youth refer frequently to the “Ozone responsibilities” of respect, love, and encouragement, which means they hold each other accountable for welcoming and affirming all youth. Rights and responsibilities are posted and often referenced. The Drop-in Center hosts several groups and activities that provide vital prevention and education information. Our leadership training and development activities attract and allow youth to showcase their talents in productive ways. We opened the Drop-in Center in 1999 specifically to provide a safe refuge for African-American, mixed-race and LGBTQ2S youth from the Ypsilanti area who have historically been disenfranchised from mainstream helping institutions.

The Drop-In Center might be an important place for Jamie to feel welcome and affirmed, as well as to find support from adults to manage the conflict at home.

Specialized Services for LGBTQ2S Youth

PrideZone, our LGBTQ2S Youth Support Group, was one of the first of its kind in Michigan, and has served as a model for other agencies interested in establishing similar services. Held primarily at our Drop-In Center, this group gives peer support to youth who are experiencing isolation, oppression, violence or uncertainty over their sexual orientation or gender identity.

All therapists and case managers are trained to recognize and respond to the unique needs of LGBTQ2S youth. Our family therapists are trained specifically in the methods designed by Caitlin Ryan of the *Family Acceptance Project*, San Francisco State University. The Family Acceptance Project™ is a research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for LGBTQ2S children and youth, including suicide, homelessness and HIV, in the context of their families, cultures and faith communities. We use a research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially and religiously diverse families support their LGBTQ2S children.

Titus and Jamie might benefit from *PrideZone*, as well as from family therapy. Ozone House staff could help them navigate broaching the topic with their parents or guardians. Maria is also welcome at *PrideZone*, but her stated priorities are housing and income.

Emergency Housing for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Emergency housing is provided through a contracted room with a kitchenette at a local hotel. Youth may stay in emergency housing for up to 2 weeks. Emergency housing is for youth who lack a safe housing alternative and for whom the adult homeless shelter would be too dangerous. The goal of emergency shelter is to provide safe housing while the youth works toward transitional or independent living, or while they explore other housing options. Case managers provide daily support.

This is an option for Maria. However, according to the agreement with the hotel, she would not be permitted to have guests during her stay, and so we could predict for her that this might be a difficult expectation for her to follow.

Rapid Rehousing

Instead of offering youth experiencing homelessness a bed in a homeless shelter, we offer short-term rental assistance so they can move into an apartment quickly. That way, they get a home of their own and skip a demoralizing and sometimes unsafe homeless shelter situation.

This project would be important for Maria, because it could offer her the independence she is used to, as well as the safety and stability she needs.

Temporary Shelter (Youth 10–17)

To ensure the immediate safety of youth who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness, Ozone House provides temporary shelter, food and clothing. Ozone House has a six-bed shelter that is licensed by the state of Michigan. Youth stay for up to 21 days, receive three meals per day and are supervised by at least one paid trained adult staff person at all times. The overall goal of the shelter is to provide these youth with a safe and stable environment in which they can work with their families to reduce conflict and improve communication and functioning, so they can safely return home. In cases where a youth cannot safely return home, Ozone House works to find safe housing. During their shelter stay, youth participate in daily therapy sessions, daily therapy groups, daily life skills groups, twice-weekly family therapy, academic tutoring and educational support, intensive case management and crisis stabilization, daily youth development and recreational activities, physical activities, and supervised constructive and leisure time. Therapy continues when youth return home.

Both Titus and Jamie could benefit from shelter and the family therapy that is part of the program. In shelter, they would also have the chance to develop peer relationships and meet other youth in similar situations. Ozone House is often the first place where youths' identities are affirmed and where they can access accurate information and support.

Transportation

All our buildings are located within one block of a bus stop and less than a mile from the bus stations, including the Greyhound station. When youth are not familiar with public transportation, we provide access to transportation for youth in emergency situations. We have a contract with the local taxi company, and we have bus tokens at all sites for clients to use. Case managers transport clients to appointments.

No doubt Maria could use help with transportation, given her financial situation.

Youth Development Opportunities

One of our primary objectives is to offer youth development opportunities in the form of a participatory service delivery process and by involving youth in agency leadership and service provision. Through seats on our Board of Directors and on our youth advisory council, called *SpeakOut*, as well as through participation in program planning and full partnership and control of their own service planning, Ozone House involves youth in every aspect of the agency. *Youth Making an Impact* is a service-learning program that provides many youth with their first opportunity to give back and to be seen as leaders who can make a positive contribution to their community.

These opportunities could benefit all three youth—Titus, Jamie and Maria—by offering a platform where they can build their skills and identify as leaders. However, we would want to help alleviate their initial crises first.

Therapy

Youth experiencing homelessness may have come from chaotic and unstable home environments characterized by family conflict, violence, poverty, and/or mental illness. Simply to survive, youth experiencing homelessness may have developed creative coping skills that are no longer necessary or effective in a safe and stable setting. Such stressors and ineffective coping skills render therapy an essential component in helping them develop the emotional capacities needed to become healthy and self-sufficient. Ozone House therapists employ a strengths-based and trauma-informed model of therapy that encourages youth to

deal with past trauma and issues of grief and loss; enhance self-esteem and self-concept; develop healthy coping skills; and create positive relationships with peers and adults.

All three youth would benefit from therapy. Maria would probably be the least receptive to it until she can find safe and stable housing. Her history of abandonment, abuse and broken attachments would likely render her naturally skeptical of being vulnerable with a therapist.

Transitional Housing

A seven-bed program for youth experiencing homelessness between the ages of 16 and 20, this program provides youth with a safe place to live for up to 18 months while they work toward self-sufficiency. The program helps youth gain emotional stability, develop life skills, obtain employment and look for permanent housing. Residents participate in case management and weekly skills workshops, and they find and maintain employment or education or both, remain substance free, complete daily and weekly house chores, and follow through with mental health and substance-use disorder treatment when appropriate. Each resident works intensively with a case manager to reach their goals. Each youth submits a portion of their earnings to Ozone House, which we keep in a savings account and return to the youth to help pay for permanent housing, transportation and household items as they transition to independent living.

Transitional housing is an option for Maria, though we suspect that sharing a home with others and complying with curfews would curtail Maria's independence to an undesirable level. Titus could benefit from transitional housing, and could still work with family therapists to maintain and improve family relationships.

Case Management

All clients of Ozone House receive case management services. The duration and frequency of this service depends on the needs of each youth, and can range from multiple hours daily, to one hour every other week, to any frequency in between. Case managers work with youth to create, monitor and reevaluate goals, and provide needed support and assistance so that clients may achieve their stated goals. Case management generally includes case coordination, referral, advocacy and providing such concrete services as meals, transportation, education and employment support, and housing. The case manager's role is not to solve the client's difficulties for them, but to use their skills and knowledge to increase the client's access to a comprehensive array of services, all in the context of a respectful and affirming relationship.

With case management services, the focus is typically on removing external barriers to safety, health and productivity. Maria is most in need of case management to secure housing, education or employment or both, income, health care and other ancillary services.

Educational Assistance and Advocacy

Educational advocacy and formal tutoring are provided through our *Education Project for Homeless Youth*, the local McKinney-Vento School liaison. Supports include tutoring, connection to special education services and advocacy around discipline and school climate, especially for LGBTQ2S students. One young person who needed to enroll in a Generalized Education Development (GED) program at a local high school had difficulty from the outset, because the person doing the enrolment stated the youth was not a “good fit.” Our caseworker initially hoped the issue was related to test scores, but quickly realized the enrolment officer was discriminating based on perceived gender identity. The problem was exacerbated because the young person used she/her pronouns, but had recently been released from a juvenile correctional facility that was literally called a “boys training school.” Our caseworker supported the young person to talk with the enrolment officer, who said the school was a “traditional” setting, and because the youth was “alternative” she should not enrol. The youth was angry and discouraged, and considered leaving the program. Our caseworker approached the actual GED teacher to determine if the entire program was unsafe, or if the enrolment officer was acting alone. The caseworker learned the enrolment officer had developed a reputation for discriminatory behaviour. After meeting with the teacher, the caseworker was confident this youth’s intersectional identities as an LGBTQ2S youth of colour would be affirmed and respected in the classroom. However, the caseworker did not stop there. She supported the young person to meet with the teacher so the young person could decide for herself. The youth-teacher relationship grew over time, and the young person flourished in the classroom. While we would have preferred that the entire school environment was as welcoming as that teacher’s classroom, we know there are limited resources and the young person did not have a choice about where to go for the education she needed. As such, the caseworker did everything possible to advocate for the youth’s needs, to support her to advocate for herself, and to make her own decision about how to proceed. The young person did earn her GED.

As promising as individual situations like this can be—successfully advocating for youth and helping broker relationships like the teacher-youth relationship described above have become more frequent—this type of individual empathy and relationship-building does

not have much effect on the overall climate in the schools. We have not solved the problem of negative school climates for LGBTQ2S youth. Yet.

We also have an endowed fund to help youth pursue their educational goals by financing expenses that are not typically covered by financial aid and scholarships—books, supplies, technology, extra-curricular fees, housing deposits and others.

Titus and Jamie are in high school and may benefit from educational assistance. Though Ozone House recognizes the primacy of education in a youth's development, educational assistance may not be feasible until Titus and Jamie feel safe in housing.

Employment Training

Our employment training program, *WorkZone*, provides soft skills training, on-the-job coaching and paid internships, so youth can build their resumes, gain work experience, secure professional references and earn money. Many LGBTQ2S youth have experienced discrimination in hiring, and this program helps mitigate this problem. We use a mock interview format during training, and employers participate in 'speed-dating-style' interviews with *WorkZone* youth. This process helps mitigate youths' anxiety, and helps employers see these youth first and foremost as workers. When LGBTQ2S youth of colour go on their own for job interviews, employers often make an initial assessment of youth based on their perceptions of the youth's social identities, as opposed to their employability. However, when employers meet youth in the *WorkZone* program, they are primed to meet young people who are defined by their employment-seeking status, not their social identities. Employers in the *WorkZone* program participate in training that includes content about gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, and we screen out employers who discriminate overtly. Our job coach also goes to all employment sites as well, and is available by cell phone to all employers and youth if there are conflicts or other employment concerns. As with the schools, we have not yet solved the discrimination in hiring or employment practices, but the *WorkZone* program helps effect positive change in individual situations.

Maria, not having held legal employment, could benefit from this low-barrier way to gain work experience and confidence.

Health and Dental Care

Many youth experiencing homelessness place a low priority on health needs, due to their current living situation, lack of resources or fear of health care providers. Ozone House has found that having free care on site addresses all these issues. Our partner, the Corner Health Center, provides a Nurse Practitioner for Ozone House’s clinic, and she can follow up with youth at the Corner Health Center. At present, we link with pro-bono dentists and surgeons who openly welcome LGBTQ2S patients.

Maria is likely the most in need of health care. Since Titus and Jamie are in school, we could presume they have had a physical in the past year, though they would both benefit from a health care provider with expertise and experience in LGBTQ2S needs.

Permanent Supportive Housing

To help youth experiencing homelessness with disabilities to obtain and maintain safe, stable housing, this program offers ongoing case management and counselling services, paired with rent subsidies. Support ranges from daily home visits and check-ins to monthly skills training. In addition to frequent visits, Ozone House staff are on call 24 hours a day for emergency or crisis situations that may arise for youth in placement.

Recommendations and Future Direction

Because youth do not live exclusively inside the walls of safe and affirming programs, programs should serve as models for how to position LGBTQ2S youth for success. While we track many outcomes, such as safe relationships, permanent housing, access to supports, and employment and education, our greatest success is realized when youth who pass through our environment—whether for two minutes or two years—experience equity and safety to such an extent that they are not satisfied in any other environment that is not as safe, inclusive or equitable. Most LGBTQ2S youth do not ‘stumble’ on those kinds of environments; instead, they participate in creating safety and equity. Programs are most successful when they continually take stock of their policies, environments and services by engaging in honest self-assessments and collecting feedback from youth. Any gaps between an organization’s current state and best practices of safety, inclusion and equity for LGBTQ2S youth can then be addressed and ameliorated.

Organizations can amplify the voices of LGBTQ2S youth in their communities by advocating and educating the community. We have found two methods particularly effective in educating the community. First, of course, the authentic voices of youth themselves are most effective for changing hearts and minds. However, securing informed consent can be complex. It is never our practice to ask a youth in crisis to tell their stories to the community, because ameliorating their current situation is our highest responsibility. We sometimes approach youth to speak out once they experience more stability and safety, but only when their therapist or case manager determines they have not felt pressured to do so. Next, we talk with the youth at length about informed consent. Many give consent immediately for pictures, videos or speaking engagements. In the past, we erred on the side of not asking youth to give us pictures or videos for educational or fundraising purposes, but over time many youth helped us understand they wanted the opportunity to give back. However, they often do not have a full understanding of what it means to lose control of their likeness or story. The loss of agency for youth who have experienced trauma and for youth who are vulnerable to violence, bigotry or hatred because of their identities can be traumatizing in and of itself. We actively work to ensure youth have as much personal agency as possible. As often happens, if the audience draws its own conclusions about a youth in a photo or video, there is not much that youth can do to regain control of their story. Images or media shared or posted on email, websites or social media can be accessible indefinitely. A young person may be willing to give consent today, but it is hard for them to know how they will experience having personal information available to the public in 10 years. Informed consent is therefore a process, not an event, and we frequently check in with youth about their comfort level over time. All the same, serving as an authentic youth voice can provide a strong sense of both agency and mastery for a young person, and their voices can be a powerful method to educate and advocate.

The other method for education and advocacy that we have found to be extremely powerful is using simulations. We provide scenarios for community members to ‘inhabit,’ and then we lead them through a series of decisions and systems to navigate with limited resources. Audiences have consistently described experiencing a visceral sense of understanding of and empathy for youth experiencing trauma, bigotry and homelessness because of simulations. Every time we use simulations, we witness participants who do not share the same social identities as the youth we serve experience an aha moment in which they—often for the first time—understand how inequitable systems have impacted youth by creating barriers and removing choice from them. This shift in thinking is powerful: inevitably audience members shift the focus of the problem from the individual to the

systems that individuals have to navigate. In other words, the participants stop blaming the youth for their circumstances. These simulations are especially helpful for building empathy in teachers and other youth-serving providers. As with the complexity of obtaining informed consent, there are precautions to consider when using simulations. First, there is a risk that participants will reinforce their existing negative prejudices by projecting their own subjective impressions about identities of youth onto their scenarios. This can be remedied by careful and active facilitation. Second, there is a risk that participants will over-identify with their scenarios and later mistake their subjective experience of the simulation for lived experience. This, too, can be mitigated by facilitation and follow up.

At Ozone House, we have learned that we have some gaps between our current situation and best practices, and our strategic plan addresses these gaps. First, though our washrooms are private, we need to create individual sleeping rooms for all our residential programs. Individual sleeping rooms will provide more options for youth who have experienced complex trauma, as well as for transgender and gender-expansive youth. Second, recognizing that youth communicate increasingly by text messaging and social media applications, we will expand our crisis line to include opportunities for youth in crisis to reach us by text or online. Third, we will seek more transitional housing and housing subsidies to house more youth. Finally, research on adolescent brain development and social-emotional developmental milestones for LGBTQ2S youth has convincingly shown that youth as a life stage persists into the mid-20s. There are scant services for youth older than 21, and we plan to offer services and supports for youth up to age 25.

Reference

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