

Combating HIV through Economic Empowerment:

**An analysis of employment policies
& practices related to transgender
individuals in Los Angeles**



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HIV among transgender individuals in Los Angeles

The City of Los Angeles spans approximately 470 square miles and is home to an estimated 3.9 million people; creating a rich diversity of culture, race and ethnicity. Since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, over 46,797 people have been diagnosed with HIV, and an estimated 26,349 people in the City of Los Angeles were living with HIV at the end of 2012.¹ Although the City of Los Angeles is only one of the eighty-eight cities that make up Los Angeles County, it represents nearly a third (32%) of the people living with HIV/AIDS throughout the county. City-specific data on transgender people and HIV are limited, however, countywide, the estimated prevalence of HIV among this population is staggering. The Los Angeles County Division of HIV and STD Programs (DHSP) estimates that 15.1% of transgender women and 0.6% of transgender men are living with HIV in Los Angeles County (LAC), based on an estimated total of 14,428 transgender persons living in LAC (with a range of 7,214 to 21,642).² HIV prevalence estimates stratified by race/ethnicity indicate those at highest risk for HIV are African American/Black transgender women with HIV prevalence of 48.3%, followed by Native Americans (26.9%), Latinas (17.1%), Whites (4.6%) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (3.7%).³

Social determinants of health: Economic opportunity and HIV risk

To fully understand the context behind these data, it is important to understand the social and environmental factors that impact the everyday lives of transgender people. These factors are *social determinants of health*, or the conditions and circumstances into which people are born, grow, live, work, socialize, and form relationships and the systems that are in place to deal with health and wellness.⁴ These complex and overlapping community, social, economic, and environmental factors influence an individual's and a collective community's risk for health inequities and include the effects of stigma, discrimination, and violence.⁵ Social determinants play an important role in facilitating or impeding one's optimal health and well-being, thus, populations that are disproportionately impacted by detrimental social determinants experience greater health disparities. This is certainly true with respect to the transgender population.⁶

Historically, very little data have been available related to transgender communities. Over the past few years, however, national, state and local needs assessments and behavioral risk studies have been conducted with respect to transgender people – particularly transgender women - and HIV. The data collected to date provide insight into their risks for HIV acquisition and transmission, and the myriad co-factors that contribute to these risks.

The modest body of knowledge on transgender health that has been developed highlights the ways in which social and economic marginalization due to gender identity discrimination creates barriers to good health, mirroring the broader appreciation of the ways in which social and structural factors influence health. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, a national survey of 6,456

Transgender (or Trans*)

is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth.¹³ The term transgender includes people whose sex was assigned as male at birth, but identify themselves as female or as a woman; people whose sex was assigned as female at birth but identify themselves as male or as a man as well as others who may not identify as either male or female because they do not subscribe to society's binary gender paradigm. Instead they may identify as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or any other number of identities that represent the lived experiences of gender-diverse people. The asterisk in Trans* is meant to capture these and all other identities that fall outside traditional gender norms.

Many people who technically fit this definition of transgender may not identify as such for a variety of reasons. Some transgender individuals have had, plan to have, or hope to have medical interventions to feminize or masculinize their bodies (e.g. hormone therapy and/or gender reconstructive surgery), while others have no interest in such medical interventions.

Although often categorized together under the umbrella term LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), sexual identification and gender identity are two distinct domains. Transgender people, just like non-transgender people, may be sexually attracted to men, women, other transgender people, or any combination thereof.¹⁴

transgender and gender non-conforming people, found that respondents experienced unemployment at twice the rate of the general population, with rates for people of color up to four times the national unemployment rate. Furthermore, respondents who were currently unemployed experienced debilitating negative outcomes, including nearly double the rate of engaging in street-based economies (e.g. sex work, selling drugs), twice the homelessness, 85% more incarceration, double the HIV infection rate, and double the rate of current drinking or drug misuse to cope with mistreatment, compared to those who were employed.⁷

Employment is central to the lives of most individuals and the lack/inadequacy of employment is significantly linked to poverty. Poverty, in turn, is ranked as one of the most powerful socioeconomic indicators that contribute to shaping population health, impacting health disparities and increasing HIV risk.⁸ Anti-transgender bias and stigma are critical issues for many transgender persons with lifelong consequences. Harassment at school leads to high dropout rates among transgender youth, and those who drop out of high school earn significantly less than their counterparts with high school and bachelor's degrees. Moreover, finding a job and earning a living wage is much more challenging for high school dropouts. Dropouts experience a poverty rate of 30.8% compared to their counterparts with bachelor's degrees (with a poverty rate of 13.5%).⁹ These issues are compounded for transgender persons who experience additional layers of challenges due to discrimination and gender related stigma. Chronic underemployment is hazardous to health. Those who cannot afford basic necessities are more likely to experience circumstances that increase HIV risk.¹⁰ Evidence suggests a syndemic relationship of mutually reinforcing interaction between sex work, substance use, homelessness and HIV infection, in particular for young transgender women.¹¹ These data indicate that multiple health-related psychosocial factors, including low self-esteem and discrimination and victimization, may be additive in their association with sexual risk behavior and self-reported HIV infection among young transgender women.¹²

These findings and others highlight the role of social determinants of health in exacerbating HIV risk. There is a great need for innovative models of prevention that address not only individual behaviors that contribute to HIV risk, but also address structural and environment issues that fuel the epidemic.

Existing transgender economic empowerment efforts

Policy development and non-profit programming are two types of existing efforts to promote trans* inclusivity in the workforce within the City of Los Angeles. For example, via the Workplace Gender Transition Guidelines,¹⁵ the city has instituted protocols for gender transitions that clearly delineate expectations and responsibilities of Human Resource (HR) personnel, managers, supervisors, transitioning employees and their co-workers. Additionally, transgender economic empowerment programs are housed at two non-profit agencies within the city: the Los Angeles LGBT Center and St. John's Well Child and Family Center.

Transgender Economic Empowerment Project (TEEP)

The Transgender Economic Empowerment Project (TEEP) was developed in 2008 at the Los Angeles LGBT Center. TEEP currently assists over 300 people every year with seeking and maintaining employment in Los Angeles. The Project is housed within the Legal Services department and is staffed by a full-time program manager and a part-time client advocate. TEEP provides services to help trans* people develop professional skills, find employment with trans-friendly employers and thrive in the workplace. TEEP's services include private sessions with a client advocate, career coaching, job interview and resume workshops, assistance with name and gender change and other legal assistance as necessary. TEEP also provides transgender sensitivity trainings and workshops for local businesses.

TEEP has four service categories: 1) outreach to the transgender community and potential employers; 2) assessment of client's education level, previous work experience and skill set; 3) case management of client's progress; and 4) job placement. TEEP conducts trainings for potential employers to provide education on the transgender community as well as to assess their readiness for employing transgender and gender non-conforming persons. When appropriate, TEEP also provides employers with assistance in creating gender-safe work environments and free trainings to ensure agency compliance with laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on gender identity and expression. TEEP has collaborated extensively with established organizations working towards systemic institutional improvement, including the City of Los Angeles Work Source System.

Trans*Empower Program at St. John's Well Child and Family Center

Launched in 2014, the St. John's Well Child and Family Center's Trans*Empower Program aims to assist transgender and gender non-conforming clients in achieving their education and/or employment goals and reduce their risk of HIV. Case management services assist clients with job preparedness, workforce (re-)integration, establishing pathways to education, and referrals to a robust network of resources. The Trans*Empower program utilizes a strength-based approach and provides the necessary support to increase individuals' access to professional development and build skills, self-efficacy and empowerment.

In addition to local initiatives, there are similar models of transgender economic empowerment programming in other communities. For example, of special significance is the Transgender Economic Empowerment Initiative (TEEI) housed at the SF LGBT Center in San Francisco, CA. TEEI is a collaborative program that has staff members and offers program services at several organizations allowing each agency to bring its own unique strengths to the partnership. Since 2007 TEEI has helped transgender and gender non-conforming people find – and keep – good jobs in safe, equal, and rewarding workplaces by providing:

- Employment Support and Case Management
- Mentoring and Networking Clubs
- Life Skills, Leadership Training and Employment Workshops
- Career Fairs and Employer Spotlight Events
- Employer, Service Provider, and Advocacy Trainings
- Legal Services and ID Document Support

Other cities across the country that are home to innovative transgender employment programs include:

- Seattle, WA: The Seattle Transgender Economic Empowerment Project (STEEP) at Ingersoll Gender Center
- Chicago, IL: The TransLife Center (TLC) at Chicago House
- Washington D.C.: Project Empowerment, a program run by the District of Columbia's Department of Employment Services

Research project aims & methods

In 2013, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Center for HIV Identification, Prevention and Treatment Services (CHIPTS) convened a workgroup to identify best practices and potential models to address the health and wellness needs of transgender people in Los Angeles. Building upon foundational work that had previously been conducted by others in the transgender and service provision communities^{16,17,18} the workgroup identified opportunities to strengthen and transform the health and wellness needs of transgender people in Los Angeles. One of the key recommendations identified by the workgroup was impacting HIV by addressing issues of poverty and lack of economic opportunities for transgender persons through an economic empowerment lens. To expand upon this recommendation the City of Los Angeles AIDS Coordinator's Office (ACO) funded a small formative research study in 2014 to answer the following questions:

- **What data are collected, if any, on the hiring, training and retention practices of businesses within the City of Los Angeles?**
- **What are the hiring, training and retention practices found within the City of Los Angeles with respect to transgender individuals?**
- **What can be done to improve the hiring, training and retention practices among businesses in the City of Los Angeles?**

These research questions were addressed through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data from businesses within the City of Los Angeles; from a variety of transgender individuals who have sought employment within the City of Los Angeles; and from other stakeholders. The study team, comprised of staff at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and consultants, utilized a mixed-method approach: conducting an online survey, key informant interviews, and focus groups.¹⁹ In collaboration with the City of Los Angeles AIDS Coordinator's office, the study team also hosted a community meeting on World AIDS Day to present preliminary findings, convene a panel of experts, and facilitate a discussion on the importance of economic empowerment as an HIV prevention tool in the transgender community. Themes that emerged from the community discussion supported the study findings, outlined in more detail below.

Findings: Transgender employment experiences

In order to gather data on community members' experiences seeking and maintaining employment, the study team conducted a focus group open to all persons of transgender experience. Two themes were prominent: 1) micro-aggressions experienced by transgender people have a serious impact on their ability to seek, obtain and maintain meaningful employment; and 2) trans-inclusive business practices need to be institutionalized so that the burden of ensuring economic opportunities does not rest solely with individuals. Both of these themes are discussed in more detail below.

Impact of micro-aggressions on transgender individuals' employment experiences:

Micro-aggressions, or, “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative insults,”²⁰ impact every stage of employment for transgender people. Consider the following examples of micro-aggressions that a job-seeking transgender woman may face: not being referred to or considered for an open position for which she is skilled because people around her do not notice her job-related skills since they can't see past her transgender status; when called to come in for an interview, the

“Being trans is always the issue. From the moment you first go to apply, it's the issue. It's exhausting.”

caller assumes she is a man based on her voice; encountering hostile stares and gestures on the bus on her way to the job interview; an interviewer who is clearly uncomfortable making eye contact with her; being given the wrong restroom key after the interview was over; not being able to count on solid references because her previous employer(s) doesn't know how to refer to her after her transition; having to constantly educate well-intentioned colleagues about what it means to be a transgender person; and interpersonal and institutional obstacles with obtaining appropriate workplace identification (e.g. badge). The act of job seeking is typically stressful for most everyone, regardless of their gender identity. For transgender individuals, especially those who are further marginalized due to immigration status; race/ethnicity; lack of formal education; seeking, obtaining and maintaining employment can be daunting tasks given the everyday subtle and often unintentional insults they face in addition to potential acts of overt discrimination and hatred.

Need to institutionalize trans-inclusive practices:

Improvements in business practices with respect to the treatment of transgender employees has largely been the result of tireless advocacy on behalf of individuals, typically transgender individuals and their allies. These individual champions for change should be valued and nurtured, but ultimately changes in business practices need to be institutionalized so that the burden of initiating them and maintaining them does not fall solely on individuals. For example, the City of Los Angeles' Workplace Gender Transition Guidelines, referenced above, is a written document that clearly outlines how staff on multiple levels are expected to prepare for and manage the process of an employee's gender transition. Clearly not all transgender individuals wish to undergo gender transition nor will they do so “on the job.” However the existence of these protocols allows for a respectful and positive experience for all those involved, if and when an employee chooses to transition. Of equal importance, the existence of these protocols means that the *responsibility* of ensuring such an experience is not carried solely by the transgender individual nor any other individual – rather, the responsibility is *institutionalized*.

“All we need is an opportunity – a chance.”

“I never talked about being trans. I didn't want to open that door. I knew the implications.”

Findings: Current employment practices

In order to better understand existing business practices the study team developed an online survey for businesses and conducted key informant interviews with Human Resources (HR) professionals. These data are somewhat limited given the small sample size and self-selection bias, however, the results similarly reflect recent national²¹ and California²² data.

The anonymous online survey targeting HR department staff was comprised of 20 questions related to the hiring and retention practices of transgender persons. There were a total of 30 respondents, representing both the private and non-profit sector. A third of the respondents were from for-profit businesses ranging in size from fewer than 50 employees to more than 500 employees. The remaining two-thirds of the respondents were from non-profit organizations ranging in agency scope from social service provision to health care provision.

Highlights from the survey results included:

54% reported that they did not document employees' gender identity.

54% reported that they did not conduct any transgender-sensitivity training.

40% indicated that their agencies were ill-prepared to support an employee in disclosing their transgender identity.

26% indicated that neither gender identity nor gender expression were incorporated into their agency's equal employment policies (12% were not sure).

The study team also conducted five in-depth interviews with key informants including HR personnel and workforce experts. HR managers were asked about their agency's policies and practices related to the hiring and retention of transgender persons. The key informants all recognized the federal and state protections that prohibit discrimination based on sex and gender expression and reported that their agencies honored these protections. However, informants made a clear distinction between federal and state laws and internal agency policies and practices. In cases where agencies had formal written policies, they were all created after a self-identified transgender person championed the cause. All the informants agreed that the federal and state laws were not sufficient to impact the culture or practices of an agency. Informants pointed to the need to develop and implement internal policies that support transgender inclusiveness, not only during the HR hiring phase, but throughout all phases of employment and throughout all departments.

Despite resources that exist to assist employers in creating a supportive and friendly environment for transgender persons, it appears that many workplaces are not proactive about establishing policies or adopting practices until a transgender employee enters the work scene and advocates for themselves.

"We haven't had anyone transition on the job. The four employees that we have now all came to us...they're transwomen. And they all came to us...already living full time as women. I don't think we've formalized anything."

These data mirror the themes uncovered in the focus groups about transgender persons' employment experiences. Importantly, the buy-in and commitment from agency leadership necessary to create and institutionalize a culture of transgender inclusiveness appears to be deficient even among those agencies that were motivated to respond to the survey.

Recommendations

Sustainable system-wide change must occur at multiple levels in order for both employers and trans* persons to benefit. This includes skills-building for trans* individuals, agency-level change in practices and programs, and policy change. The ultimate goal is to not need specific strategies or interventions for transgender individuals – the ultimate goal is a system of equality. However, until system-wide equality is realized, establishing protective policies and procedures in order to stimulate change is integral to creating lasting impact.

Skills Building: Increasing access

As described above, there are emerging best practices related to the development of employment programs that are specific to or inclusive of trans* communities. Particularly given the success of these efforts, it is imperative that such programs and similar efforts are expanded to ensure widespread access in geographically large communities such as Los Angeles. Moreover, to ensure sustainability of existing efforts, there must be sufficient resources and support from local government.

Agency-level: Institutionalizing trans* inclusive work places

Agencies and businesses have the power to create immediate and lasting impact by making internal changes in organizational policy and practice. The following recommendations reflect agency-level changes to support the institutionalization of trans* inclusive work places:

- Create an institution-wide commitment to understanding and addressing the needs of transgender people. Hold ongoing required diversity trainings that include transgender-sensitivity as well as the full range of diversity represented in the transgender community. Provide training for all staff that gives a clear message that discrimination is not acceptable or tolerated.
- Update all personnel and related agency forms to include more inclusive categories for gender.
- Review internal hiring practices and employee manuals to be sure that they incorporate fair workplace resources.
- Ensure that transgender people are represented at all levels of the organization, from entry-level to senior management; and from volunteers to board members. This includes the development of recruitment policies specifically for transgender individuals (i.e. the active recruitment of transgender individuals) to ensure representation.
- Become expert at health insurance coverage as it relates to transgender individuals. For example, while all qualified health plans under Covered California must comply with California's 2006 Insurance Gender Nondiscrimination Act, not all transgender individuals may be aware of that requirement.

- Provide safe and accessible restrooms by utilizing gender neutral single stall bathrooms, where possible.²⁴
- Update workplace policies to include protocols on managing and supporting employees with gender transition.²⁵
- Create a policy that addresses pronoun usage, which includes information on how to correct mistakes and how to inform colleagues about others' preferred pronouns. Ensure that all staff, volunteers, and board members know the policy and understand the reasons behind it.
- Update brochures, websites and other written material to clearly and visibly include transgender people.
- Create a workplace culture where transphobic incidents, including remarks, are not tolerated. Support those in your organization who speak out against transphobic language and actions.

Policy-level:

Influencing employment climate for trans* persons

Local governmental bodies hold a great deal of power to influence positive change. In addition to the impact on government employees, the actions of government can have significant impact on the availability of programs as well as on public and private workplaces. In order to affect change from the top down, local governmental bodies should consider incorporating the following recommendations into their policies:

- Provide transgender-sensitivity training for all agencies and departments that transgender individuals might access, including social services (e.g. housing services, food assistance, etc.).
- Require change by clearly communicating to all agencies and contractors funded through local governmental bodies that any agency or contractor in business with governmental bodies are required to maintain and uphold policies that prohibit discrimination and harassment against trans* employees, in accordance with local and state laws.
- Require funded agencies and contractors to develop personnel and workplace policies that support employees' use of their chosen gender and name.
- Provide on-going training and technical assistance for individual agencies to create trans* friendly workplaces (the elements of which are described above).
- Invest in on-going, reoccurring training with workforce centers (e.g. every 6 months).
- Foster an environment that allows agencies in the process of change to motivate, support and learn from one another (e.g. create or support a network of trans-friendly companies/employers).
- Create a resource network on transgender workplace diversity for HR managers, transgender employees and allies.
- Partner with local transgender economic empowerment programs as well as other training and capacity building programs (see resources) for support and guidance and to ensure a comprehensive approach to trans* inclusiveness.

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Resources

The Center for Strengthening Youth Prevention Paradigms (SYPP Center) at Children's Hospital Los Angeles: <http://www.chla.org/sypp>

The Center of Excellence for Transgender Health: <http://transhealth.ucsf.edu>

Transgender Economic Empowerment Program (TEEP) at the LA LGBT Center: <http://www.lalgbtcenter.org/teep>

Transgender Law Center: <http://transgenderlawcenter.org/>

City of Los Angeles Workplace Gender Transition Guidelines: <http://tinyurl.com/nhtrug8>

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Notes

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24. Safe and accessible restrooms are not only for transgender employees but for any employee that may feel uncomfortable encountering a transgender person
25. While addressing gender transition is important, please note that many transgender and non-gender conforming individuals may not wish physically alter their bodies in any way or transition from one gender to another.