

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender) Needs & Disaster

Disasters affect an entire community without regards to individuals' specific needs or circumstances, including sexual orientation. Religious leaders best serve an affected community by focusing on every survivor's unmet needs in a respectful and dignified manner. Your leadership may be needed to ensure that LGBT survivors receive full access to assistance programs and services during all phases of the disaster lifecycle, but especially in relief and recovery programs.



Food, shelter, clothing and other types of assistance typically provided by faith communities in disasters affects all survivors, and response should spring from compassion for all, regardless of their particular circumstances. For some religious leaders, providing such care may pose a personal or spiritual/theological challenge; however, when serving the whole community, it is important to recognize the common dignity, humanity and needs of all its members.

In the best of times, lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered persons (LGBT), are subject to bigotry, fear, misunderstanding and sometimes harassment and/or violence. The stigma associated with being LGBT can be heightened during and following a disaster as everyone affected struggles to cope and to recover. At times, LGBT people have even been singled out by religious leaders as being responsible for causing a disaster. Religious leaders need to be aware of the impact of their words on the healing of the whole community—and, to learn about the particular needs of LGBT people in their midst.

WHAT IS SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

As a religious leader, you can educate your faith community and help them develop compassionate attitudes toward LGBT individuals, who may need the disaster services you provide. Here is a summary of some key concepts to promote understanding: The term “sexual orientation” is used to describe an individual’s romantic, emotional or sexual attraction to another person. A heterosexual orientation refers to an individual’s attraction to someone of the other sex. A homosexual orientation reflects an attraction to a person of the same sex. The term “gay” is commonly used for both men and women attracted to members of the same sex. However, women attracted to women are also referred to as lesbian. And, when someone is attracted to both men and women, he or she self-identifies as be “bisexual.” It is important to note that “sexual orientation” refers to a broader range of feelings and behaviors than those related to sex and sexual gratification. Although rare, some individuals who refer to themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual choose to not engage in sexual activity at all. In addition, for some people, both hetero– and homosexual, their sense of sexual orientation is innate and fixed. Others live within a spectrum of sexual orientation and/or become aware of their sexual orientation at different points in their lives.

- “Gender identity” refers to the internal sense of whether one is male or female, rather than the sense of being attracted to people of the same or opposite gender.
- “Transgender” refers to a person who is born with male or female anatomy yet self-identifies as a member of the opposite sex. Some choose surgery (transsexual) to alter their physical gender identity; others choose to remain physically as they are, but dress and live in the lifestyle of their gender identity.

PREPARING FOR DISASTERS

Because LGBT couples and individuals face different challenges in disasters that heterosexuals do not encounter, they should take steps before a disaster occurs to ensure their spouses/partners are legally acknowledged and protected. Some examples:

- Draft a last will and testament to designate how assets should be distributed
- Leave instructions and legal documents that designate health care proxy, power of attorney and funeral arrangements
- Designate their partner as beneficiary on health insurance, workers compensation and life insurance forms
- Ensure their partner is listed on renters’/homeowners’ and auto insurance policies
- Ensure that family members, friends and places of work have partners’ emergency contact information

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY LGBT PEOPLE IN DISASTERS

Medical Issues. Although several states have “marriage equality” laws, the federal government and most states do not recognize same-sex unions. This can pose a challenge for LGBT couples if one becomes injured or killed during a disaster. LGBT persons can be denied the right to visit their spouse/partner in the hospital or make crucial medical decisions on their behalf. In the case of death, the surviving spouse/partner has no claim to make burial decisions unless a legal partnership has been established. Also, LGBT survivors do not receive automatic inheritance rights to property or assets. **Disaster Benefits.** Even if a same-sex couple are legally married, they still cannot receive each others’ federal disaster benefits. Similarly, states that do not legally recognize same-sex marriages may not allow partners to receive each others’ state disaster benefits.

AVOIDING DISCRIMINATING AGAINST LGBT PERSONS IN DISASTERS

During a disaster evacuation and afterwards while waiting to return home, many survivors may find themselves living in a shelter environment, often with a number of strangers. While this is a stressful and difficult situation for heterosexual individuals and couples, the challenges are far greater for LGBT individuals. As a religious leader, you are in a position to minimize the discomfort and outright discrimination and prejudice that LGBT people face in a disaster setting. Your actions and words can set the example for others to follow in terms of treating everyone with dignity, respect and fairness.

It is important to keep in mind that disasters do not distinguish according to sexual orientation or sexual identity, and that the basic necessities of food, water, shelter and clothing are required by everyone. All world religions emphasize the essential dignity of every human being, and disasters are often a stark reminder of that fact. Your ability to focus on the humanity of all individuals who were affected by the disaster, rather than their sexuality, sends a powerful message that actions stemming from fear, disrespect or outright homophobia are not to be tolerated by a person of faith or a fellow citizen.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A desire to treat everyone affected by the disaster with dignity and respect is a critical foundation to humanitarian relief, but to make it work on a practical level can be more challenging, especially if people are living in a shelter temporarily. Common concerns center around the use of bathroom and shower facilities, and sleeping arrangements within the shelter. The particular circumstances and resources in your disaster situation will dictate the best solutions; however, the following are issues that need to be considered from the LGBT perspective;

Toilet & Shower Facilities

Toilet facilities, regardless of the sexual orientation of the people using them, need to be safe and sanitary, and provide sufficient privacy. Posting signs describing bathroom rules can help remind people to be considerate about keeping the facilities clean, and to maintain privacy and safety. Similar rules should be posted regarding the use of shower facilities. Parents should accompany children, especially young ones, to the bathroom.

Use of the “Wrong” Bathroom

It is important to note that LGBT people are not the only ones who may need access to the bathroom and shower of the opposite gender. Parents who need to accompany children in the bathroom or shower and caretakers who need to assist elderly or disabled people face similar issues of being in the “wrong” bathroom or shower. As a leader, you need to be aware that there are many circumstances where a strict division between women’s rooms and men’s rooms is impractical, and you should take steps to make it convenient for everyone without compromising the dignity of anyone or forcing someone to publically reveal their gender choices by requiring them to use a specific toilet or shower facility. A possible solution is to designate a bathroom, especially a single-stalled bathroom if one is available, as being a gender-neutral or family bathroom. Other ideas include having a sign-up sheet for times to use the shower and stationing a monitor outside the bathroom door for anyone who requests privacy in the toilet or shower.

A Word About Safety

The concern about maintaining a strict gender division in bathrooms has to do with a perceived sense of safety. However, keep in mind that no sign on a door will guarantee safety by preventing someone of the opposite gender from entering, and that being in a same-gender bathroom is likewise no guarantee of safety. Seeking to maintain a convenient and dignified way for everyone to use the toilet and shower is at least as important as safety concerns. LGBT persons are not typically sexually predatory toward children or other adults – statistically, child predators and rapists are usually heterosexual men.

Sleeping Arrangements

Unless there is another factor, such as religious requirements that men and women of the same family sleep separately, families and couples with or without children who want to sleep in the same area should be allowed to do so, whether they include same-sex or opposite-sex partners. Being evacuated to a shelter is a stressful situation, and most people are comforted by having their family together. Likewise, single people both LGBT and straight, might prefer to sleep in an area designated for people without children since they can be disruptive. You should post clearly stated rules that the safety of all is critically important, regardless of gender-orientation or family status.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **American Psychiatric Association: Healthy Minds — <http://healthyminds.org/More-Info-For/GayLesbianBisexuals.aspx>**
- **Transgender Law Center: <http://transgenderlawcenter.org/pdf/PIP%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>**
- **About.com: How Gays Can Prepare for Hurricanes, Floods and Natural Disasters — <http://gaylife.about.com/od/gayparentingadoptio1/a/hurricaneflood.htm>**