

Exploring Transgendered Community and Gender Based Programs In Greater Victoria

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During Spring 2003, University of Victoria Sociology student Lisa Warrilow undertook a research project to examine how accessible gender-based social and health-related services were for transgendered individuals in the Victoria region. This report presents the findings of this research work conducted under the aegis of the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group's Research Internship Program.

An important finding of the study was a confirmation that significant numbers of transgendered people are accessing or attempting to access gender-based services, i.e., services directed exclusively at males or females. The survey found that more than half (53.8%) of the agencies which responded had some experience of transgendered people either accessing the services, or as employees and volunteers. This finding alone suggests there is a need for trans inclusive policies and practices among gender-based service providers in Victoria.

At the same time, the study found that most service providers in Victoria (69.2%) had no training to assist them in serving transgendered clients and that most (61.5%) did not have a policy on provision of services to transgendered clients. Despite that, 53.8% of the agencies reported having made efforts to make their services accessible to transgendered clients, either through diversity policies, specific referral procedures, having speakers on trans issues and encouragement of trans-friendly activities.

Victoria service providers generally fare better than their Ontario counterparts: a similar survey in Ontario (Trans Accessibility Project, 1999) found 27.6% of respondents had dealt with transgendered clients. Likewise, 62.5% of Victoria service providers indicated an awareness of specific transgender services to which they could refer transgendered clients, compared with 24.1% in Ontario.

To become more trans friendly, several agencies in the Victoria study indicated a need for ongoing education and training; that despite earlier training from Transcend, turnover among staff and volunteers meant the benefit of that training was lost over time. Several organizations who indicated they had no policy also indicated that they had a need to develop a policy on trans inclusion in their agency. And several organizations who have a policy of trans inclusion indicated the policy did not include ways of making trans clients more welcome or special efforts to make the trans community aware that the agency served trans clients.

The study selected 20 agencies to survey from a list of 70 gender-serving organization. Of the 20 agencies approached, 13 agencies responded with answers to survey questions.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Methods	5
Findings	7
Discussion.....	10
Conclusion.....	12
Bibliography	14
Endnotes	14

Introduction

This project was developed out of a need identified by Transcend Transgender Support and Education Society to examine the accessibility of social- and health-related services for transgendered (trans) people in the Victoria region. In their work as trans advocates, Transcend has specifically become aware of the lack of access to gendered services for trans people. As they commented in their research proposal, “in the past, many [agencies] who serve women only or men only have turned away trans people requiring their services.”¹

This sentiment is echoed in other enquiries into health and social service providers in Canada. For instance, Viviane Ki Namaste

discovered numerous injustices in the provision of health and social services in Ontario. She describes how “[trans people] lacked informed, safe access to hormones, were mistreated by hospital staff, were denied entry to traditional alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs and were refused access to shelters for youth, women and the homeless.”² In the area of gendered service providers, she discovered that some shelter staff immediately refused access to trans youths and others insisted upon “gender appropriate” dress and behaviour for access.

Given the information uncovered in previous reports on the subject and Transcend’s similar experiences in their work with the trans community, we felt it important to come up with a more concrete

and cohesive picture of the extent to which this type of discrimination is occurring in Victoria. Specifically, this report has been written to help Transcend obtain a catalogue of the policies and practices of local gendered service providers towards trans individuals. With this information, Transcend will be able to inform the trans community on the agencies that are trans friendly, and perhaps make attempts to reach out to those organizations that have expressed an interest in learning more about the issues.

The term transgendered (trans) can be difficult for some people in our society to understand and define. There are many myths and misunderstandings when it comes to dealing with trans people in everyday life, and because of this many people simply choose to ignore the issues. Generally, a trans person includes one who “exhibits the appearance and behavioural characteristics of the opposite sex,”³ feels a deep need to express their gender in ways that differ from the gender norms of society; or often feel that they were born with bodies that fall outside the common definitions of ‘male’ and ‘female.’⁴

As Transcend and other advocates for trans issues express, there is no one single way to define or describe the identities and experiences of all members of the community, however some of the common terms used to refer to different community members include: cross dressers – e.g.- drag king/queens, male/female impersonators; transsexuals – those with a cross-gender identity who live in the gender of their identity and desire or obtain sex reassignment; and intersexed people – those who are born with sex characteristics that do not fall into what is socially constructed as ‘normal.’⁵

Many people in the trans community have experienced discrimination and been marginalized because parts of mainstream society is ignorant, intolerant and hostile towards trans people and communities. In this way, trans people can identify with and share many of the hardships and discrimination that other marginalized peoples face. As the writers of the Trans Accessibility Project in Ontario describe, trans people “grow up feeling isolated; they are often ridiculed in public; they may be assaulted or even murdered because they are trans; and they may lose their children and jobs when they self-identify.”⁶

Clearly, mainstream society has a long way to go in accepting and embracing the trans community. One area that needs to be addressed is the accessibility of gendered services (health and otherwise) to trans people. In consulting the literature on trans access to certain services, it appears that the trans community is being excluded from using many gendered facilities. Cope and Darke, from the *Trans Accessibility Project*, explain this exclusion from the perspective of women, saying, “trans women cannot make use of services designed for men. These services are inappropriate for women, do not meet their needs, and can be dangerous places for trans women. At the same time, most services designed for women are not prepared to accommodate trans women.”⁷

There are many issues surrounding the inclusion of trans people in our society, and many of these need to be addressed and discussed. This small scale survey will focus specifically and primarily on the issues regarding trans citizens’ access to gendered service providers in the Capital Region. This project was undertaken with the help of the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG), and

Transcend Transgender Support and Education Society.

VIPIRG is a local organization that is “dedicated to research, education, advocacy, and action in the public interest.”⁸ Through their Research Internship Program they seek to link university students looking for an option in obtaining course credit by working with local organizations that lack resources to conduct much needed studies. The aim is to help the community groups complete their goals.

The group that I had the pleasure to work with was Transcend, a local non-profit organization run by members of the trans community that seeks to “to address the systemic social, political, and economic conditions that negatively affect trans people, intersex people, and our family members.”⁹ Together, we aimed to examine gendered service providers in the Capital Health Region and what their policies and practices are concerning trans people. Transcend has expressed a need for such a report since they are aware that previously many organizations that serve only women or men have turned away trans people who are in need of their services. In light of this reality, Transcend has previously attempted

to reach out to some organizations in the region, however they have lacked the time and resources to complete a more in-depth investigation and analysis.

When I first met with the people from Transcend they asked me why I wanted to carry out this particular study. There were a number of other projects available through VIPIRG's Research Internship Program, but for some reason Transcend's proposal caught my eye. One of the main reasons for choosing this study was the fact that I felt uninformed about trans people, and was eager to learn more about the issues that are important to this community. It is important to me that I was part of a study that had a praxis approach to it. I wanted to do the study to inform myself about the issues, but as well this project has a clear purpose, which is to help Transcend in their advocacy role in the trans community.

In addition, I wanted to do a project that related to the material that were we covering in critical research strategies. I think that by working with the trans community; a group that has difficulty getting respect and attention in our society, this related to the issues that we covered in class. For example, we have studied participatory and action

research, researching from the margins and creating knowledge with intent to produce change. I think that through this study I am able to experience these techniques first hand while working with a group in order to produce results they can use to better both their community, and the larger community.

Methods

As mentioned before, one of the reasons I was eager to complete this study was the potential for being grounded in the principles and techniques of critical research. I think that in many ways, undertaking this study embodies certain characteristics of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Stringer outlines some of the key features of PAR, which include: an emphasis on the full participation of the community involved in the study; the development of relationships between researcher and community which promote feelings of equality; and using the research as a means for taking action. This project with Transcend and VIPIRG, was an example of how participatory action research can be adapted to work well in different situations.

In terms of the participation of the community in the research, Transcend aided

by providing guidance, information and suggestions on how to complete an accurate and worthwhile research project that could be used to help the trans community in Greater Victoria. At the beginning of the study, I felt I was not fully educated on trans issues and struggles trans people face. This led me to welcome any and all of the insight that Josh and Donna of Transcend offered. Similarly, VIPIRG's Bruce Wallace and I were able to brainstorm with Transcend to develop a research plan that would serve the needs of all involved. This back and forth exchange of information is a key feature of PAR, as it allows the researcher and the community to interact on a level playing field, and aims to promote feelings of equality.

Another key aspect of PAR we were able to demonstrate in this study was its focus on praxis. Our research strategy was designed with the clear intention of providing Transcend with information on the policies and practices of gendered service providers in the Capital Region, so that they may use this information to inform the community and perhaps reach out to service providers who would like education and training on trans issues.

We felt that for our purposes, the study would be best served by the use of a 10-question survey designed to assess the availability and quality of gendered service providers to trans clients in the Capital Region. We encountered some challenges in formulating the questionnaire as many of the issues we wished to address are sensitive. We wanted to encourage the most truthful and honest responses as possible. In the formulation of our questionnaire, we referred to two studies of trans service providers, one that was conducted in Ontario and the other in British Columbia (Appendix). Although these studies were focused on trans women and women's services, we were able to adapt a number of questions for our purposes. I believe that our finished product was clear and concise, addressed the key issues we wanted to examine, and encouraged the most open and honest participation of the organizations.

Once we had our survey completed and pre-tested by a VIPIRG affiliate, we faxed the questionnaire to our participants. The organizations we asked to respond came from a list of service providers that Transcend had previously obtained through their work in the community. From an original list of about 70 organizations we narrowed our sample to 20. We chose these

organizations for three reasons: first, they were the ones we felt to be the most crucial services to the health and well-being of trans people (i.e. emergency shelters); secondly, we estimated (by previous experience with certain organizations) which ones would be most likely to respond; and finally because of time constraints we wanted to keep the size of the sample smaller for more feasible content and ease of analysis. Overall, our focus was on agencies that provide the most critical services to the community; such as emergency housing and health services. In the end, the twenty services selected were a mix of male-based and female-based organizations which provide a diverse range of services including emergency shelter, housing, health, and counselling services.

Findings

We faxed out the surveys but due to time constraints we were forced to implement a deadline in which the questionnaires had to be returned. We made follow-up calls and this resulted in thirteen of our twenty questionnaires being completed and returned, giving us a respectable 65% response rate. We ended up getting responses from three male-based service providers and ten female based. Of the thirteen completed questionnaires, seven

involved live-in services and six did not. Of the thirteen organizations (53.8%) have had some experience with trans people, either as a client, volunteer, or employee. Five organizations (38.5%) were unaware if trans people had utilized their services, and only one group commented that they had not had any experience with trans people.

Transcend specified a few key areas they found interesting in their role as trans advocates for emphasis in this research project. Specifically, these concerns were: what criteria does a trans person have to satisfy to be eligible for services; what, if any, are the policies and practices of organizations with regard to trans clients, employees and volunteers; and what are the main concerns in attempting to include trans people into these organizations. With these questions in mind, we were able to develop a survey that would provide a general idea of how accessible local gender-based organizations have been to trans people, and what can be done to increase accessibility.

We provided a list of nine choices for our question relating to the criteria necessary for a trans person to be eligible for services. Response was varied to this question. Nine out of thirteen organizations (69.2%) noted

that the criterion for service eligibility is self-identifying as the gender that the organization serves (e.g. women using a women's shelter). Six of the nine organizations that require a self-identity state that gender identity is the only criterion they require. Other organizations needed more than simply a self-identity as their basis for eligibility. For example, two organizations added that the trans person must not disclose to other service users that they are trans. Two others required identification and a name that is congruent with the gender that the organization serves.

Next, our informants were asked if they knew where they could refer trans people in the event that a trans person came seeking referrals for specialized health services. Eight of the thirteen organizations (61.5%) suggested that they were aware of specialized services and knew where to refer any interested people. The five remaining groups (38.5%) commented that they did not know where to refer trans people for specialized services, however two of these groups noted that they would be willing to find out if the situation required it.

The next question in the survey determined the extent to which the members of the

organizations (i.e. - staff, volunteers, board) have received training on trans issues. Most of the organizations (69.2%) reported that they had not had any training on trans issues. One group expressed an interest in receiving training and another suggested that although they did not have any specialized training, their staff tries to, "personally self-inform regarding trans issues." Of the four remaining groups, one noted that both staff and volunteers had received training; three said only staff had; and one said only volunteers had.

Subsequent questions dealt with the ways in which organizations have made specific efforts to provide services to trans people. Five groups (38.5%) stated they had not made any specific efforts in this regard. There were, however, seven groups (53.8%) that had made efforts to be more trans accessible and were able to describe them in some detail. The remaining group did not comment on this question. The organizations utilized the following methods to be more trans-friendly: a general acceptance of diversity in the agency; the development of specific procedures for referrals; the encouragement of trans-friendly services/activities; a specific policy that welcomes trans clients; announcements

made at trans events that agency is open to trans individuals; and having guest speakers in to discuss trans issues.

One of the questions that Transcend was most interested in was whether or not gendered service providers had specific policies dealt with trans clients, and if so, what these policies entailed. Of the thirteen organizations in our sample, eight (61.5%) stated that they did not have any policy on trans clients. Of these, three expressed that either they were working on developing such a policy or felt the need to do so in the future. The organizations with current policies will be explored in the discussion section of this report.

The organizations were also questioned with regard to what they felt were some of their main concerns as service providers to trans people. This question was sectioned into four parts to include concerns for trans clients, concerns for non-trans clients, concerns for staff, and concerns for administration. With regards to clients, for trans people the results indicated that the number one and two concerns were ‘feeling unsafe/fear of other people’s reactions’ (46.1%) and ‘lack of resources to deal with trans-specific concerns’ (30.8%); For non-

trans clients the two main concerns were ‘lack of education, awareness, information’ (46.1%) and ‘discrimination/discriminatory attitudes’ (46.1%). The members of the organization expressed concern in the following areas: for staff the top two concerns indicated were ‘lack of education/information/training’ (30.7%) and ‘none’ (30.7%); and finally for the administration the top two concerns were ‘procedures’ (38.5%) and ‘policy development’ (30.8%).

When specifically asked what could be done to help to make the organization more trans accessible each informant provided a different suggestion. There were four organizations however, that felt that they did not need to work to make their organizations more accessible. One organization commented that they did not know how to, because their policy is simple, and they have not had any problems with it in the past. Some specific comments from these organizations included: “Nothing”, and “We are accessible”. The remaining organizations provided us with valuable input on the ways to help the Victoria health and social service community more accessible. The majority of the organizations (31%) suggested that education and training would be invaluable

in the quest to make their organizations more accessible. Other organizations mentioned advice from and communication with the trans community, and the development of policies and procedures.

Discussion

For the purposes of this discussion I would first like to do a comparison of the results of this short survey to the responses obtained by the Trans Accessibility Project survey that was done in Ontario in 1999. That survey was sent out to 79 organizations and of those, 29 were returned (a 36.7% response rate). Interestingly the organizations in the Victoria region had considerably more experience with trans clients than those in Ontario as 53.8% of our informants versus 27.6% of theirs commented that they had dealt with trans clients. Similarly, on the question of whether or not the organization was aware of places to refer trans people for specific services, 61.5% of the organizations in Victoria reported that they did, and only 24.1% of the Ontario agencies reported being aware of where to refer trans people. In terms of the training of staff, volunteers and board members, despite the fact that few of the agencies in Victoria reported having training (69.2% do not), the Ontario agencies still

were less educated, with 79.3% reporting having no training.

The other survey questions that warrant comparison between the two regions had a more consistent response rate. Both Ontario and Victoria organizations reported overwhelmingly that training, information and education were keys to producing more trans-friendly service providers. Also, with regard to the concerns in providing services to trans people the key responses in Ontario were similar to those in Victoria, and included: feeling unsafe/fear, lack of education, awareness and training, and the development of policies and procedures.

It is interesting that the organizations in Victoria seem to be more experienced and open to accessibility than those groups surveyed in Ontario. Undoubtedly, the small sample size taken here in Victoria does not provide the most accurate representation of the state of trans accessibility in Victoria, but it certainly provides us with an indication that service providers are not completely ignorant on the issues and are open to working with the trans community in increasing accessibility.

Through discussion with the collaborators on this project, I think we have determined that one of the most important points that has been uncovered in this study is the fact that trans people are in fact accessing, or trying to access gendered service providers in the Capital Region. From this we can assume that there is in fact a need for more inclusionary policies and practices to be put in place in Victoria, and ideally these organizations should attempt to make their inclusive status known to the community. Education and training is also an important factor that needs to be addressed in relation to this issue. Over and over on our survey, organizations have noted that lack of awareness, training and education are major barriers to becoming trans friendly. One ‘women only’ non-residential service provider suggested a need for greater education and awareness, saying “more awareness by the collective [is necessary] when making assumptions (i.e. All women have vaginas...all men have penises), especially when TG [trans] people are present.”

Given this identified need for specific policies and practices to be put in place, it is evident that the majority of the organizations surveyed here do not have specific policies.

Fortunately many of these organizations that do not have policies do realize that the need is there. One male only, non-residential organization expressed the difficulties in being inclusive in a group therapy session due to “lack of understanding and discomfort.” But the staff member goes on to comment that “it is important that trans people and non-trans [people] feel enough safety and comfort to open up” and that “such an environment is possible, but more time is needed to put together a group in which all members are at ease.”

Of those organizations that claim to have inclusionary policies, only two of them deal specifically with trans people. The policy of one female-based service provider includes such exclusionary statements as: “[we] welcome male-to-female transsexuals as “women” and as a community within the women’s movement. We welcome working with transgendered women as sisters offering a unique and valuable perspective to the women’s movement.” In contrast, the other organizations made more general comments such as “they are welcome here”, and “our policy is to provide service to persons self-identified as female.” These comments suggest that these organizations don't have a policy because they may

assume that trans people will know they are open to everyone. Although these organizations believe they are open to all clients, they need to go further and adopt specific inclusionary policies. One reason would be so that trans people can be protected if a staff member discriminates against a trans client, or a staff member can be protected if a client complains. Also, as Donna from Transcend suggests, “the absence of policy leaves staff without direction on how to respond to specific situations which, in my view, is the primary purpose of a policy.”

Transcend admits that making or changing specific policies to be more trans inclusive is an involved and sometimes difficult process. Josh from Transcend admits that it isn’t “necessarily the policy itself that makes agencies more open, consistent, and fair, but rather the process involved in creating a policy -- which involves staff thinking about and learning about some of the issues.” Overall, what Transcend hopes to accomplish is to have local service providers serve trans clients, and then move to getting them to openly admit it.

To become more trans friendly, organizations have identified a need for

ongoing education and training. For example, one organization discussed the difficulty in training people because their organization has a high turnover rate. Another organization mentioned that their staff had received training, but also added “we need to do more training for new people.” Similarly, another agency said that a former house coordinator had received training, but “unfortunately did not pass it along.” Similarly, after examining the survey results Transcend noticed that organizations they previously helped with trans issues have evidently reverted back to ‘square one’ – as it seems the training and information that Transcend had provided has been lost.

Conclusion

Overall, I think that this survey has helped identify the state of trans accessible services in the Capital Region. Although we do recognize the limitations of our small sample size and our relatively brief survey, I think we can confidently say that we have a product that serves the intended purposes. Importantly, this survey has identified a need in Victoria for gendered service providers to work towards education and training to make their organizations more trans accessible.

It is clear that members of the trans community are reaching out to these agencies and for the most part, agencies are responding in a positive way. I think an important effect of this survey was that it created discussion among the staff and boards of these agencies regarding the issue of trans accessibility. Perhaps this will lead them to reach out to organizations such as Transcend for the resources and support many have identified as necessary to making

their organizations more inclusive. For the people active in Transcend, hopefully this project has succeeded in providing a more cohesive idea of the state of trans accessibility in the Capital Region. They can continue their role as advocates for the trans community and use the results of this survey to reach out to organizations that have identified a need for education, training and support.

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