



Remarks from Outright Vermont for the House and Senate Appropriations Committees re: Restoring Funding to support Statewide Education Work

To the Members of the Appropriations Committees,

Thank you for taking time this evening to hear our testimony.

For the past 30 years, Outright Vermont has provided comprehensive statewide initiatives that improve the lives of LGBTQ youth. Every program, training, and resource we provide ensures that these largely at-risk youth develop a healthy sense of self and vital peer connections. Simultaneously, we focus on strengthening families, and helping to transform schools, communities, and systems.

LGBTQ youth often face challenges associated with a lack of family support and acceptance, limited access to other peers who share their identity, and school climates where standards of safety, protocols and procedures differ dramatically between schools. Developing a healthy sense of self while fending off negative feedback can be all-consuming. A culture of exclusion, an inability to identify peer allies and/or adult role models, and a lack of access to resources due to our rural geographical landscape all contribute to youth feeling isolated and alone.

According to the 2017 YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data), LGBTQ youth in Vermont are 4.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the last 12 months than their heterosexual/cisgender peers, 3 times more likely to have skipped school because they felt unsafe on route or at school in the past 30 days, and 2 times more likely to be bullied. In addition, LGBTQ youth face high rates of bullying, harassment, anxiety, depression, body image issues, low self-esteem, and other adverse childhood experiences.

We know that students achieve greater academic success and are safer overall when they feel connected to their school (CDC, 2009, "School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth"). And I imagine we can all agree that schools want to be the best they possibly can, for their entire community of students, faculty, administrators, and families. It doesn't mean, however, that they know *how* to get there, especially when it comes to supporting some of our most marginalized youth identities. This is the expertise of Outright.

GLSEN conducts a National School Climate Survey - it's a report on the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools, including challenges they face and school-based resources that support LGBTQ students' well-being. *This survey has consistently indicated that specific school-based supports are related to a safer and more inclusive climate.* The four indicators include supportive: educators, LGBTQ-inclusive

curriculum, inclusive policies, and student clubs, Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). Meaning, we know what helps! But handing someone a road map and telling them to get to the destination is of no use if they don't know how to drive. Or, even if they are a great driver, doesn't make them immune to missing a turn along the way. Point being, implementation is separate from knowing the answers, and this is where Outright Vermont's Education efforts are critical.

SCOPE OF EDUCATION WORK

Each year, Outright serves over 2,100 LGBTQ youth and their families, and nearly 5,000 educators and service providers in every county in Vermont. Our goals are always to increase protective factors, improve school climates, and provide role models and sources of support to help youth thrive.

Outright Vermont provides comprehensive assistance to school districts statewide. Specific initiatives incorporate the following:

Trainings, Workshops & Consultations

Provided to teachers, administrators, counselors, and students in a variety of settings. Visiting classes, faculty meetings, assemblies, in-service days, as well as conducting audits of LGBTQ affirming spaces and policies, and providing recommendations for access and inclusion.

Social Support and Community

Mentoring and supporting students and educators through the Vermont GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance) Network, which currently houses over 70 schools statewide. We work with elementary, middle, and high schools to start or sustain these social, support, and advocacy groups. We offer technical assistance and regional networking to GSA's statewide, and help youth develop and deliver supplemental curriculum. GSA's help mitigate the risks of isolation associated with LGBTQ identities in favor of safety and inclusion.

Statewide learning opportunities and network building:

Annual events, including the GSA Conference and the Queer & Allied Youth Summit, as well as our online Youth Leadership Council, provide youth leaders with opportunities to develop peer connections, build skills, and create shared goals.

FUNDING

I am here today specifically to seek support in addressing a critical funding gap in our education program. For the past five years, Outright received funding from the Agency of Education to support the efforts outlined above. Last year the money we received totaled roughly \$60,000, most of which came through a federal grant. Unfortunately for Vermont, the federal government changed the eligibility criteria for the 2019 cycle, and our programs are no longer eligible to receive that critical funding.

Outright has worked hard to create a diverse revenue stream to ensure our programs are sustainable and able to reach every person, family, and system that needs us... and let me just say, there is a tremendous need! With a full-time staff of 6, (three of whom do education-based work), our current annual operating budget for 2019 is \$529,351.

As you can see from the attached pie chart (last page of this document), we have projected that 30% of our budget must come from private contributions (individual and corporate), 20% from two annual events, 14% from foundation grants, 11% from fee for service revenue (camp and trainings), and 1% from rental income. The final 24% of our budget - \$125,000 - is what we hope to receive in government funding. For this year, we have accounted for \$85,000 of that total through federal grants. The rest is what we hope to have restored as sustainable and consistent State funding for many years to come.

Outright Vermont's Education Department tailors' trainings to individual school needs, provides real-time case consults via phone or in-person around specific student/family concerns, creates sample curriculum, supports implementation, and shares best practices. While we do ask for an honorarium for our professional development trainings, we do not turn schools away for their lack of ability to pay.

But the bottom line is, fewer resources, fewer trainings, less safe schools, more at-risk youth, and so on and so forth. This cut in funding, which has covered a majority of the salary dollars for our Director of Education, would radically shift our staffing, our service delivery, and Vermont's LGBTQ youth experience in schools. This is our moment to be out in front, as Vermont often is, to send a clear message about where our priorities are, and to back those values with critical dollars. Helping to provide stability for Outright Vermont means saying yes to safer and more equitable schools.

We are grateful for the strong support of H.3, which brings actionable steps to ensure ethnic and social equity in Vermont schools. We hear from LGBTQ youth across the state that they do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum they are taught. Inclusive education, and specifically LGBTQ-inclusive sexual health education, has been an Outright youth priority for the past many years (in addition to more training for teachers on LGBTQ competency). In fact, two of our Education staff members are currently across the street at the hotel giving a training to over 40 health educators from across the state on how to teach inclusive sexual health education!

It's hard to imagine Vermont schools - and specifically youth and educators in rural districts - functioning without the support of Outright Vermont, and specifically our education services. Without reliable funding, our ability to offer support to Vermont school communities is nonexistent. This funding gap jeopardizes our ability to provide guidance and refine policies that reduce risk and increase educational and health outcomes for LGBTQ students and school systems statewide.

On behalf of the Outright staff and board, and in solidarity with LGBTQ youth across the state, we thank you in advance for recognizing the need, and helping us to identify a source of funds to fill this gap so that we can continue our critical work on behalf of Vermont's at-risk youth.

