LGBT Survivors: Living on the Margins

by Karen Tronsgard-Scott, Executive Director

Vermont – billed as “Utopia” for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered men and women. Indeed, my family moved to Vermont nearly six years ago after researching many states to find a place where we would be accepted, have legal standing, and where our son could feel like his family is “normal”. We were looking for a place where we could assimilate.

We have assimilated and we love it here. Back in the Midwest, our neighbors never spoke to us; parents – whole gymnasiums of them, stared at us when we attended our son’s events; parent-teacher conferences were agonizing with the unspoken questions and judging. To my family, Vermont is a haven of acceptance. But then, my wife is not violent. We haven’t been sexually assaulted or the victims of hate crime.

Because the truth is, even with our laws and relaxed attitudes, LGBT Vermonters still exist in a world that marginalizes them. Living on the margins makes LGBT Vermonters particularly vulnerable when domestic or sexual violence happens to them. All too often, acceptance and understanding extend only so long as LGBT Vermonters’ lives look like model heterosexual Vermonters’ lives. When domestic or sexual violence happens to LGBT folks, old stereotypes appear, homophobia on the part of service providers emerges, and the glaring dissonance between Vermont law and federal law challenges individuals and systems.

Far, far too many LGBT Vermonters lack the faith in laws and systems to feel comfortable reaching out for help. Across our state, LGBT Vermonters live silently with domestic violence and sexual assault because they fear that engaging the system will make things worse, or because they don’t know where to go to get help.

The Member Programs of the Vermont Network are partnering with the RU12? Community Center on a project which will build the capacity of Member Programs in their efforts to serve LGBT survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Over the course of the coming year, with support
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Survivors:  
The Need for Safety in a Culture of Inequality

By Kim Fountain, Executive Director, RU12?
Community Center

"Any woman, any person I should say, who is a victim of domestic violence is a victim of domestic violence, and beyond that it should be of no concern.”¹

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, there are a number of concerns related both to experiences of domestic and sexual violence (DV, SV) and access to safe and effective services. The services for LGBTQ DV and SV survivors must account for the ways in which the safety of LGBT survivors is compromised beyond the spectrum of traditional domestic and sexual violence frameworks, services, and funding streams. This should not be a stretch in thinking for a movement that continues to have to struggle against social norms to name and address the war on women.

The social and cultural climate in which an LGBT person may experience DV and SV is one of societal homophobia and transphobia, or the fear/hatred/disapproval of LGB and T people. Add to this a general lack of knowledge on the part of service providers about the stressors and vulnerabilities in the lives of LGBT people and these communities remain marginalized and at risk within victim services.

Batterers know that regardless of what laws are on the books individuals within systems such as law enforcement and victim's assistance or within families and religious institutions, can and do inflict bias-related harm on LGBT people. Some of this harm might rise to the level of criminal activity but, similar to domestic violence, great harm can be inflicted without breaking any laws when taken as individual instances.

After the heinous hate-related murder of a young gay man, Mathew Shepard, Steve Sack published a political cartoon with a stodgy man asking, "Why should some minorities be singled out for 'special rights'?" The next cell showed a silhouette of a dying Mathew Sheppard tied to a fence with the caption, “Because some minorities are singled out for special wrongs.” These sorts of special wrongs for the LGBT communities include state sanctioned discrimination, the highest number of recorded murders of LGBT people in 2011, and constant interpersonal acts of aggression against LGBT individuals. In many states, LGBT people still lose our jobs, families, and homes because of homophobia and transphobia. In the current election year, our lives once again are wedge issues in political debates. Even in the very politically liberal state of Vermont, the RU12? SafeSpace program continues to get reports of anti-LGBT bias and discrimination. For LGBT people who live at the intersection of identities such as elders or people with disabilities, the odds of facing discrimination or violence increases dramatically.

To not account for this level of homophobic and transphobic violence is to willfully deny that we live in a culture where LGBT people are singled out for harm. It is also to deny that a batterer or perpetrator of sexual violence has at their disposal options to inflict harm that would not be there if discrimination did not exist in the lives of victims identifying as LGBT or who transgress gender or sexuality boundaries even without self-identifying as part of the LGBT community.

LGBT individuals experience domestic violence at rates similar to heterosexual individuals. Approximately 1:4 relationships is a DV relationship. In addition to the ways many batterers can inflict harm, batterers in LGBT relationships can threaten to out a victim to their jobs, families, and friends. They can use societal homophobia to wear down a victim’s self esteem. These batterers and sexual predators can rely on either the perception or the reality that survivors will be revictimized by service providers, medical providers, and law enforcement because of anti-LGBT bias or because the providers are not culturally competent. Batterers can also rely on the fact that many services are either not presented as or do not actually serve LGBT people such as shelters that do not provide the full range of services to gay men or transgender survivors. Batters and perpetrators of sexual


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violence can also rely on internalized oppressions learned over a lifetime that keep LGBT survivors from reporting. Certainly there are laws protecting LGBT people, but taking on ‘the system’ in the middle of personal trauma is not ideal for anyone and should not fall on their shoulders in the first place.

Discriminatory and dangerous issues such as these must be addressed by the DV and SV movements. To do so, these movements and systems must be empowered to become culturally competent in their work with LGBT communities so that they can move beyond the thinking of people like Representative Buerkle.

On a societal level, change often means a shift in power. For many in power, this shift is perceived as a loss of safety because we live in a society where power is equated with safety. For marginalized groups, the shift means we have fewer ways to be harmed. While to some these two ideas are the same, the important difference is that maintaining a status quo through exclusion is a world apart from being able to expect safety from discrimination and hate.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), formulated in 1994, is a law that distributes funds for a broad range of domestic and sexual violence related services including but not limited to shelter, direct services, education, and research. Though it is up for reauthorization, it is still sitting in Congress because, for the first time, partisan politics are blocking its reauthorization. This puts victims and those of us who work with them, at great risk.

What are the wedge issues? Senate Bill 1925, introduced by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), reflects what advocates have been saying for decades: that all survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking need access to safety and there are some populations that face societal oppressions that increase their vulnerabilities.

Senator Leahy’s bill specifically includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) survivors; allows Native American Tribal Courts to prosecute a batterer regardless of membership status in a tribe; and maintains confidentiality protections for survivors who are undocumented immigrants. The House Bill introduced by Representative Sandy Adams (R-FL) (H.R. 4970) removes these protections from the Leahy bill and designates support for ‘true victims.’

A significant number of very thoughtful legislators have listened to countless advocates who have demonstrated the need for VAWA to be more purposefully inclusive and move beyond the ‘blanket services.’ Given these facts, the question that RU12? asks is: What are people trying to protect by not wanting to address the needs of populations with heightened vulnerabilities?

Certainly, every victim of domestic and sexual violence wants to be treated equally and be secure in the knowledge they are being offered the full range of options available. The work to get to the point where everyone actually has the same access to safe and effective services is far from being realized. Relying on the unachievable claims to treat everyone the same or to offer everyone the same services, helps to maintain the vulnerability of LGBT DV and SV survivors and should not be equated with everyone having equal access. Work above and beyond not barring people from services or adding “LGBT” to the list of communities served is needed to ensure that all survivors are safe.

To this end, RU12? Community Center has developed a ‘Training Contract System’ designed to engage service providers and victim’s assistance systems in the difficult yet rewarding process of shifting our organizational cultures. With generous support from the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the Vermont Community Foundation, RU12? has begun to implement this system in key pilot projects in different parts of the state. This collaborative venture is our part of the effort to help ensure that Vermont programs are supported in their services to the LGBT survivors.

If your address has changed, please help keep us up to date!

Yes, my contact information has changed to:

Name ____________________________________________________________
Address _________________________________________________________
City __________________________ State __________ Zip ________________
E-mail ________________________________

Mail/E-mail to: VNADSV, P.O. Box 405, Montpelier, VT 05601 or library@vtnetwork.org
I was raped in college when I was 20 years old. But let me back up a little bit so that you can get the whole story. I worked my way through college the first two years as a paid escort for the older (older than me anyway), closeted lesbians in my community. That means that I was paid to accompany them to parties and gatherings so they wouldn't have to go alone. It wasn't the noblest of jobs that I could have been doing but it did pay enough to cover my dorm room and meal ticket each semester. That was a big help since grants and student loans didn't cover the whole cost.

In the spring of my sophomore year, the college women's softball coach asked me to accompany her to a picnic that was being thrown in honor of her winning softball team. They had just won the championship. So, on a bright and sunny Saturday afternoon, the coach and I went to the picnic together.

We got to the picnic and the party was getting underway. In time, alcohol flowed freely and the team members and their friends had a pretty good buzz on. Many of the players knew about their coach's sexual orientation but some didn't. My job was to sit near the coach, laugh and joke with her and get her a beer once in a while. I also got to mingle a little with the team and learned that some of them lived in my dorm.

Towards evening, I looked around for the coach but couldn't find her. When I asked where she was, I was told that she had left with someone. So, there I was, stuck and without a ride in the middle of nowhere. One woman offered me a ride but said she was on the cleanup crew so I had to wait. By then, the party was getting rowdy.

I won't go into too much detail now since it would probably trigger me again and could trigger someone else. In summary, I ended up tied to a tree and was raped with beer bottles, hands and sticks by a group of women at the party after everyone else left. Then I was driven home to my dorm by one of my attackers who lived in the same dorm, on the same floor.

At the time, I had little recourse for the attack. Since the community was largely religious, I didn't feel safe reporting the attack to the police. Besides, this type of abuse was not considered rape in my state. It also could have ended up in the paper which would end up “ outing” me to the community as well as my family. The local sexual violence organization was mostly run by volunteers and straight campus women were the people who volunteered. Reporting the rape to them would basically have forced me to come out to them. I didn't feel safe doing that since some of them could have been my classmates or professors in the future. Besides, I had never heard of a lesbian getting help from them before.

I had one friend who helped me take care of myself. I was afraid to step outside my dorm room for fear that I would run into one of my attackers. I remember not being able to eat or sleep unless my friend went to the cafeteria to get me food and stayed with me while I slept.

I didn't have a partner for years after this because I was afraid that she would see my scars, both emotional and physical, and then ask me how I got them.

I have thought back to that day many times since it happened. Was there anything I could have done differently? Said differently? Should I have acted differently? But that type of thinking continues to lay the blame on myself and not on the women responsible for the rape.

My rape happened many years ago but lesbians are raped as often as straight women even today. In Vermont we have sexual violence organizations, RU12 and Safe Space that have served lesbians and who would understand the impact same sex rape could have on a lesbian. So, I can rest my head a little easier. Knowing that if something like what I experienced happened to a lesbian here in Vermont, there would be people ready, willing and able to help them.

Karen
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from the Samara Fund, we will explore how domestic and sexual violence impact the LGBT community and how we can provide culturally-informed services to LGBT Vermonters. In this edition of the Network News, we have invited our LGBT community partners to talk about the impact of domestic and sexual violence on LGBT Vermonters; we are exploring the lives of LGBT youth in Vermont with our partners from Outright Vermont; and we are privileged to publish an article written by a survivor of sexual assault.
Sexual Violence Shelter Welcomes LGBT Survivors

By Corbett Sionainn
Associate Director of Community Outreach

I recently had the opportunity to visit with Bobbi Gagne (Executive Director of the Sexual Assault Crisis Team) to talk about SACT’s experience in providing sexual violence shelter and advocacy services to people who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). From the beginning, Bobbi made it clear that she was not talking on behalf of the LGBT population nor was she speaking on behalf of all VT Network Member Programs. She only wanted to talk about SACT’s experience in serving people who self-identified as being LGBT.

Corbett: How did your commitment for effective LGBT services start?

Bobbi: When I started at SACT in 1990, men were not part of the board or organization. SACT didn’t have a shelter at that time so services for LGBT identified survivors of rape were limited to hotline, medical and legal system support. When I moved into the position of Director, slowly the SACT board began to reflect all the people we served including the LGBT population. The Board did not tell me that we couldn’t open a gender inclusive shelter. It never occurred to me not to provide shelter to the LGBT population, their care providers and non-offending partners, spouses and family members.

Corbett: Were there any special struggles that you ran into when creating services for the LGBT populations?

Bobbi: The first struggle we ran into was about providing services for men. I received many letters from women who were angry that we were taking money they thought was only to serve women and we were serving men with it too. Women fought very hard to get money for women who were sexually assaulted and they didn’t want women survivors to lose services. It has taken awhile for people to realize that SACT can serve both women and men without one group losing out.

Another struggle we ran into were some of the special needs of the LGBT population. For example, we need to be aware that a lesbian who has been sexually assaulted by her partner might not feel safe with other females. We need to make sure that we can provide her with a place to stay in where she feels secure. Or that a man who is HIV+ may need to have his caregiver or partner housed at the shelter with him as long as the caregiver/partner is non-offending.

In our experience, sexual violence against transgender folks seems to be very physically violent. Often times they are coming here from a hospital because they have had to have corrective surgery done. So that’s another struggle we face. Because then we end up dealing with the hospital wanting to discharge them but we can’t really take them into the shelter until they are able to meet their own care needs or have a care giver that is non-offending stay with them.

Another struggle we have is how to provide individualized services for each and every victim. Each person who comes through these doors who is a non-offending human being has a right to sit down and say: These are my needs, these are my concerns and these are my struggles. Then it’s our responsibility to sit with them and figure out how to assist them in the best possible way to meet those needs. So we might work with RU127 or SafeSpace and hold a conference call with them, SACT and the victim/survivor. Then we are all part of the victim/survivor’s team.

Corbett: Can you give me some more examples of things that your shelter does that are culturally-relevant to the LGBT population?

Bobbi: I think one of the key components for me is an understanding that every individual person has a lot of differences from others. It’s important to know that none of us has all the answers.

We ask people’s gender identity and sexual orientation on our intake sheet. When we do our intake, we have tons of things listed there for people to self-identify with or look at those categories and say: I want to respond to this because I continued on page 6
Moving Toward Cultural Competency
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See myself reflected there. I know I’m not just an add-on. People fill out these sections themselves or we read it to them if they have a problem with reading or the language. It’s not the point that they self-identify, it’s the point of them being able to see that they are represented on the sheet.

We also want LGBT people, and everyone, to see themselves in the stuff that is here in the shelter. We have items in the shelter that represent all the people we serve. We have pictures, books, magazines, newspapers, etc. So there is not that question of someone saying: Oh, I’m a cross dresser and I should not say something about it. They see themselves in the shelter and know it is ok to be who they are here.

We also have a cart of personal care items for people to use while they are in shelter. There are items for men and women in the cart but we don’t keep track of who uses what. So someone can use whatever they wish to use in the cart. This can be important for someone who self-identifies as transgender.

Corbett: What has been the most effective way SACT has reached out to LGBT survivors?

Bobbi: We are working closely with RU12? and SafeSpace. I have done a lot of outreach because I have provided education to students and the community about providing a shelter. I think that the other outreach thing we do is on our website, we have tried to have everybody represented. So the military is represented. The gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community is there. We try very hard to make ourselves inclusive and outreach is really the key to people coming through the door.

Corbett: In general, what have you learned through this process and what do other organizations need to know?

Bobbi: I have learned that a lot of people have a lot of struggles that I haven’t experienced personally. They have struggles that are painful and have affected their lives like being kicked out of their family because they are LGBT and now they have been sexually assaulted on top of that. So, if their abuser is their partner, they have nowhere to go. That is why having the shelter is so important.

I don’t want people to feel like we have all the answers. But we don’t assume. We don’t assume that somebody’s abuser is male or female. We don’t assume that they will have an easier time working with a male or female advocate. We don’t assume what their struggles are. The only thing I can guarantee is that people who have given us the honor of serving them will get individualized attention to help them create their goals and work towards meeting their needs.

We need to stop putting people in group boxes that make it so that if they don’t fit into that box, they don’t get services. We are a learning organization. We are not going to know everything that someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender needs from us. We can only ensure that we are doing the best we can. Will it be perfect? No. Will it be perfected? Probably not in my time but we will continue to learn from every person who comes here for services.

New At The Network Office

Hello! I am Ana Cimino, the new Training & Technical Assistance Coordinator for the Network. I am approaching my six-month mark, and I absolutely love working with everyone. I am awe-struck by the hard work and dedication the entire Network displays consistently. Although new to the movement to end domestic and sexual violence, I believe wholeheartedly in the value found through individual empowerment and community building as a means to address the full continuum of social disparities especially as it relates to supporting survivors of domestic and sexual violence. My background is in community and organizational capacity building within the context of the affordable housing movement. This took me to Kenya and then to Washington, DC, where I managed the same AmeriCorps program in which I once participated. I am thrilled to have found my way back to Vermont! I currently live in Burlington, where I serve on the board of directors for an affordable housing organization and I spend my summer Saturdays working at the farmer’s market. I look forward to working with everyone at future trainings!
By Melissa Murray, Executive Director, Outright Vermont

The mission of Outright Vermont is to build safe, healthy, and supportive environments for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ or queer) youth, ages 13-22. Since 1989, Outright has worked to provide safety and support for queer youth, helped make schools safer, and focused on youth empowerment, leadership, and advocacy. These core areas are reflected in our programming.

Queer youth across Vermont report feeling isolated, fearful for their safety, and feelings of hopelessness. Many of these youth also report experiencing homelessness and being diagnosed with mental illnesses. Isolation, marginalization, harassment, and lack of access to resources directly impact the health and wellness of queer youth and youth who are perceived to be queer. Queer youth in Vermont also report disproportionately high rates of substance use (including drugs, alcohol, and tobacco), self-harm and suicidal ideation, and harassment and school related issues. According to the 2011 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), queer youth are up to five times more likely to engage in high risk behavior than their heterosexual peers. LGB (the YRBS does not currently track data related to transgender or queer identified youth) youth continue to choose risky behaviors more often than their heterosexual peers in every risk area identified by the survey.

There is a clear correlation between these issues and increased risk for sexual assault and domestic violence. Lack of self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and overall feelings of hopelessness contribute to an increased risk for sexual assault and domestic violence when queer youth believe they deserve nothing better. Queer youth often have no idea how queer relationships are supposed to work, and live in small isolated communities where fear of outing prevents them from leaving potentially violent relationships. Because of the higher rates of substance abuse and homelessness among queer youth, these youth often engage in survival sex in order to have access to drugs and a place to stay.

Many queer youth come out and experience violence at the hands of parents and caregivers, contributing to an overall distrust of adults. This makes accessing traditional resources challenging. Additionally, queer youth have reported not seeing themselves reflected in current prevention efforts across the state. This further contributes to the isolation they often experience in their daily lives and makes them less inclined to access traditional resources.

Outright works in collaboration with Hope Works, Women Helping Battered Women, LUND, and Spectrum to enhance services for youth aged survivors of violence. Specifically, Outright works to ensure that the needs of queer youth are reflected in all available resources and provides training and technical assistance to ensure queer youth survivors receive appropriate care. Outright also receives training and support to ensure that we are appropriately meeting the needs of queer youth survivors who utilize our services. Youth at Outright receive introductory information regarding services that support survivors of violence through interactions with staff, one-on-one conversations, and weekly Friday Night Group meetings. Support materials from partnering organizations are always available in Outright’s drop in space.

Outright, Hope Works, and Women Helping Battered Women spent the summer developing an educational program for queer youth in public high schools in Vermont. The curriculum is designed to support Queer and Straight Alliance (QSAs) Groups in initiating conversations about queer identity and healthy relationships; signs of dating violence and sexual violence in the queer community; positive queer identity and self-esteem; and empowering self-directed support.

Outright will continue to seek opportunities to collaborate on prevention efforts and support the needs of queer youth survivors of violence. Outright believes that by providing queer youth with access to queer identified role models, leadership skills, and access to a supportive community, they will have the tools they need to be successful. These tools, coupled with information about healthy relationships and safer sex, and connections to culturally competent care including services for survivors of violence, will ensure that Vermont’s queer youth continue to experience improved outcomes and be on a path to lifelong success.
### Vermont Network Member Programs

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<td>Addison County &amp; town of Rochester</td>
<td>WomenSafe</td>
<td>P.O. Box 67, Middlebury, VT 05753</td>
<td>(802) 388.4205 or 1.800.388.4205</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennington County</td>
<td>PAVE*</td>
<td>P.O. Box 227, Bennington, VT 05201</td>
<td>(802) 442.2111</td>
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<td>Caledonia, Orleans &amp; Essex Counties</td>
<td>The Advocacy Program at Umbrella*</td>
<td>1222 Main St. #301, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819</td>
<td>(802) 748.8645</td>
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<td>The Advocacy Program at Umbrella</td>
<td>93 E. Main Street #1, Newport, VT 05855</td>
<td>(802) 334.0148</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caledonia County (Hardwick area) AWARE</td>
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<td>P.O. Box 307, Hardwick, VT 05843</td>
<td>(802) 472.6463</td>
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<td>Chittenden County</td>
<td>Hope Works</td>
<td>P.O. Box 92, Burlington, VT 05402</td>
<td>(802) 863.1236</td>
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<td>Women Helping Battered Women*</td>
<td>P.O. Box 1535, Burlington, VT 05402</td>
<td>(802) 658.1996 (also TTY#)</td>
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<td>Franklin &amp; Grand Isle Counties</td>
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<td>P.O. Box 72, St. Albans, VT 05478</td>
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<td>Clarina Howard Nichols Center*</td>
<td>P.O. Box 517, Morrisville, VT 05661</td>
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<td>P.O. Box 368, Chelsea, VT 05038</td>
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Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
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Statewide Hotlines:
Domestic Violence: 1-800-228-7395
Sexual Violence: 1-800-489-7273

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