

Equality for All: How charitable giving can support LGBTQ+ Vermonters

THE TAKEAWAY

Vermont can do more to ensure equality for lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual residents. Charitable individuals can help by supporting:

- Health justice for LGBTQ+ people
- Programs for BIPOC and immigrant LGBTQ+ people
- Programs for queer and trans youth



VERMONT IS KNOWN as one of the most [progressive](#) states in the nation when it comes to policies and laws guaranteeing equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals. But that does not mean the work is done, or that Vermont is free of discrimination.

"While it can sometimes feel that we here in Vermont are safe from the hate-driven rhetoric and policies sweeping the country, it's the unfortunate truth that acts of violence and hate based on identity are everywhere, including our little state," said Phoebe Zorn, director of communications and development at the Pride Center of Vermont, a nonprofit based in Burlington. "From the murder of a trans woman in central Vermont last year, to

"We need each other, and our allies, more than ever right now."

recent media attacks and protests targeting schools and community events around the state, prejudice and hate threaten LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities here too."

This is a moment when support, including philanthropic support, really matters. As Zorn puts it: "We need each other, and our allies, more than ever."

Charitable individuals can help make a difference. Here's how:

Support health justice for LGBTQ+ people

It's rare to hear the leader of any organization, nonprofit or for profit, candidly admit that what they were doing wasn't working. But sometimes this is the first step to creating a more effective approach.

That's what happened at the Brattleboro nonprofit Out in the Open when it comes to addressing health inequities for rural LGBTQ+ Vermont residents and removing barriers for needed care, whether that is medication and treatment for HIV positive Vermonters, gender affirming surgery or a basic checkup, free of discrimination.

For several years, the group's health justice efforts included training health care providers to do a better job in serving the needs of the queer and trans community. The organization made some headway, but not enough, said executive director HB Lozito.

For one thing, it was difficult to keep up with normal job turnover. It seemed that as soon as one health care provider completed training, the provider would move to take another job, and a new hire would need training.

"We had been finding that we weren't really getting anywhere," Lozito said.

Out in the Open decided it was time for a new approach. It shifted focus from providers of care to people receiving care, with an emphasis on problem solving. The new effort is called HEART, or the Health Equity and Access for Rural TLGBQ+ Program. The nonprofit put the "T" for trans at the front of the familiar LGBTQ+ acronym to emphasize support for trans Vermonters.

"It is a peer support program where we are training volunteers and then matching them with rural community members who need lots of different supports to access competent and equitable healthcare," Lozito said.

One goal is to respond to community members who cited bureaucratic obstacles as a major problem. How does that look? When a Southern

Vermont resident was at risk of missing a pre-operative appointment for gender affirming surgery in Northern Vermont due to a transportation snag, HEART connected them to a driver, covered the cost, and got the patient to the appointment.

The ride should have been covered by Medicaid, but the provider failed to complete the paperwork in time, which could have delayed the surgery, Lozito said. A stressful situation was resolved.

Out in the Open is rural focused and offers a range of programming for LGBTQ+ people, much of it designed to reduce isolation and build belonging. This often involves pushing "against the narrative that rural places are not places for us, when we know that they are," Lozito said. The nonprofit, which currently rents its space in Brattleboro, hopes to raise funds to create a permanent space of its own. "We really want to be able to have a place where our community can feel like they are at home."

Support queer and trans Vermonters of color

State and national division about LGBTQ+ rights can create a cloud of fear and anxiety that especially affects more vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community, including people in Vermont.

"The kinds of anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, actions, and generalized hate that we are seeing increasingly right now, affect the most marginalized groups within the community most drastically, namely queer and trans people of color (QTPOC)," Zorn said.



Now is the time to show support by giving to programs like THRIVE at the Vermont Pride Center, an affinity group and support space for queer and trans people of color, which also offers direct grants to QTPOC people in financial need through a mutual aid program.

The Center's transgender program, meanwhile, offers social and legal help to all transgender adults along with community-building fundraising such as the upcoming TransPlants Plant sale May 13. "This is our biggest transgender program event of the year, and it's just such a fun celebration of spring, trans joy and community, and new beginnings," Zorn said.

In Southeastern Vermont, a coalition of groups including the Ethiopian Community Development Council is working on building support for queer/trans immigrants, refugees, and asylees. Vital Partnerships is leading the coalition effort to sponsor a Pride Without Borders event that recognizes the unique needs of people who may have fled persecution in countries with laws that criminalize and threaten the lives of trans and queer people.

Support queer and trans youth

LGBT Vermont high school students are twice as likely to be bullied as heterosexual/cisgender students, according to the latest [Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#). They are nearly four times more likely to have hurt themselves on purpose. Charitable individuals can change those statistics by giving to programs that help youth grow up healthy and happy.

This year Burlington-based nonprofit Outright Vermont will help send 120 youths to Camp Outright, where they can hike and swim, make s'mores, and have all the traditional camp experiences along with the opportunity to connect with other queer, trans, questioning, and allied youth. No one is turned away for lack of funds, thanks to scholarships and support from a variety of sources, including the Samara Fund, a component fund of the Vermont Community Foundation.

The camp, which takes place in Starksboro at the 700-acre Common Ground Center, draws kids from around the state. Outright also reaches statewide with other programming, including over 90 gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) at schools around Vermont. The clubs are particularly important for kids in rural parts of Vermont. "There are plenty of families that are not supportive and it just becomes extra challenging to meet your people and find the resources that you need and counter some of that isolation," said Dana Kaplan, executive director of Outright.

Steady support from charitable individuals is especially important right now, as is simply showing up at pride events and other public happenings that lift up LGBTQ+ youth, Kaplan said. "The amount of backlash that we are responding to, that young people and families are responding to, is at an all-time high."

Samara Fund

[The Samara Fund](#), a component fund at the Vermont Community Foundation, helps ensure lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) Vermonters are connected, healthy, appreciated, safe, and empowered. Samara provides grants to Vermont's essential LGBTQ+ led and focused organizations, such as Out in the Open, Outright Vermont, Vermont Pride Center, and the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont.

It also supports small and emerging programs and events with strong LGBTQ+ leadership. Applications for grants and scholarships are reviewed and selected for funding by advisory committees of LGBTQ+ volunteers from across Vermont.

The Samara Advisory Committee is on the cusp of releasing its New Gay Agenda, the result of a more than year-long process of taking an equity lens to Samara's vision, goals, and processes.

The new statement of values, which centers being anti-racist and committed to anti-oppression, "includes being unapologetically trans-inclusive and always doing whatever we can to support BIPOC, queer-identified Vermonters and BIPOC allies," said Mo Reilly, a member of the Samara Advisory Committee.

Deeper reading

[Pride Center of Vermont LGBTQ+ Resources](#)

[Out in the Open](#)

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