Report submitted by Egale Canada Human Rights Trust to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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May 2017
1.0 Executive Summary

Founded in 1995, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (Egale) works to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and Two Spirit (LGBTQI2S) people in Canada and to enhance the global response to LGBTQI2S issues by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education and community engagement. Egale’s vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and all other forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

In response to LGBTQI2S youth’s heightened risk of experiencing homelessness, Egale founded Egale Youth OUTreach (EYO), the first of its kind in Canada, the drop-in crisis-based social service organization is dedicated to serving street-involved and homeless LGBTQI2S youth by providing counselling, crisis intervention and housing support. In the three years that EYO has operated, we have seen a significant increase in LGBTQ refugee and asylum seeker referrals. LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers face significant discrimination, harassment, and violence within their home countries. As a result, many struggle with trauma and mental health challenges stemming from the homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia they experienced prior to landing in Canada. These service users often approach EYO in need of ongoing support not available through government-funded settlement services. EYO therefore currently addresses a serious lack of funded service provisions for LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers, one that bridges the gap between arrival in Canada and reaching a holistic sense of health, wellbeing, and inclusion in their new communities.

To continue and build upon EYO’s successes, Egale recommends the Canadian government 1) implement long-term government investments and consistent funding that supports the ongoing support of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers at all stages of the settlement process; 2) launch a large scale and national needs assessment to identify needs of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers; and 3) introduce government investments directed into systems innovations and sustainability.

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1 The acronym ‘LGBTQI2S’ is used here to reference all people with diverse gender identities and experiences of attraction (sexual orientation), including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, Two Spirit, intersex, queer or questioning. The terms LGBTQIQ2S and LGBTQ will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. However, the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex or Two Spirit people will be used to refer to specific identities and populations.
1.0 About Egale Canada Human Rights Trust

1.1 Mission

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (Egale) works to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and Two Spirit (LGBTQI2S) people in Canada and to enhance the global response to LGBTQI2S issues. Egale will achieve this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education and community engagement.

1.2 Vision

Egale’s vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, free of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and all other forms of oppression, so that every person can achieve their full potential, unencumbered by hatred and bias.

1.3 Values and Approach

Egale’s work is grounded in anti-racist and anti-oppressive (ARAO) practice. While striving to compile, produce and communicate the best-available evidence to guide our work, we recognize that the production of knowledge is always intimately connected to power, privilege and oppression. Those with the least power and privilege are often not included in the production of knowledge, and as a result, fail to be represented in the knowledge that influences their lives. Often, it is those with the least power to produce and shape knowledge who are most in need of services, leaving them un/mis-represented, under-served, ill-served, or not served at all. To honour and address the experiences of the most marginal folks in our communities, Egale undertakes to balance both academic and experiential knowledge, privileging community-based participatory practices in conducting research; consulting on policy locally, provincially/territorially, federally, and internationally; developing and disseminating resources using accessible knowledge translation approaches; and providing services to clients, community organizations, all levels of government, and individuals. Furthermore, Egale recognizes the necessity of targeting intersectional oppression, while simultaneously examining the broader social contexts that sustain and legitimize various oppressions, in order to appropriately respond to the needs and experiences of the full diversity of LGBTQI2S communities.
2.0 About Egale Youth OUTreach

LGBTQI2S youth are overrepresented in the homeless\(^2\) population, with over 20% of youth experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBTQI2S, compared to 3.5% of the general population (Homeless Hub, 2015). Family rejection, violence, social inequities, ostracism and discrimination are some major factors that lead LGBTQI2S youth into experiences of homelessness. In addition, many LGBTQI2S youth report feeling unsafe or being re-victimized in the current shelter system, and receiving inappropriate and unhelpful suicide crisis and mental health crisis support in health institutions.

In response, Egale founded Egale Youth OUTreach (EYO) in 2014, the first drop-in crisis-based social service organization dedicated to serving street-involved and homeless LGBTQI2S youth by providing counselling, crisis intervention and housing support. Specifically, EYO’s mission is to:

1) To address the needs of LGBTQI2S youth who are homeless, unstably housed, or at risk of homelessness. This includes direct service provision and providing warm referrals to safe and affirming community services and supports; and

2) To advocate for and initiate solutions to address the unmet needs of under-house LGBTQI2S youth.

In the first three years of operation, EYO has supported hundreds of youth in the following ways:

- short-term, crisis and drop-in counselling services.
- direct service provision, such as counselling and crisis prevention, emergency housing, support, intervention and post-vention.
- warm referrals to safe and affirming community services and supports.
- support locating and initial outreach with new service providers.
- ensuring continuity of care, accountability in the transfer of care, and improving service transitions.

As many of our youth have experienced bullying, harassment, and homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic violence at home, within the school system, and in shelters and community agencies, developing relationships built on trust and inclusivity is essential. For this reason, it often takes youth time before they are able to fully disclose concerns and therapeutic needs. Additionally, fear of disclosure also makes our youth reluctant to fully complete intake forms. Due to the centre’s

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\(^2\) Homelessness is not always captured by looking at the numbers of people accessing shelter services, or living on the streets. EYO acknowledges this gap by recognizing homelessness as a continuum and providing services to youth who are accessing shelters, living rough, couch surfing, living in transitional housing, and who self-identify as being at risk of losing their housing.
values related to building trust with this marginalized population, we have limited demographic data for these clients.

EYO currently has a staff of 1 full-time Program Manager, 1 full-time Associate Program Manager, 1 full-time Service Coordinator, 2 Counsellors, 2 Support Workers, and an average of 3 post-secondary placement students (social work, child and youth worker programs) and numerous volunteers who have provided thousands of volunteer hours at the centre.

3.0 LGBTQ Refugees and Asylum Seekers

LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers are often escaping countries who continue to criminalize LGBTQ identities and/or force medical treatment of a ‘curative’ nature (Lewin & Meyer, 2002), lacking access to inclusive and holistic healthcare, and are at higher risk of mental health related stress resulting from stigmatization, discrimination and harassment, concerns related to disclosure, and internalized homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia (Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights, 2014). Despite these previous experiences, research indicates that most young LGBTQ newcomers are looking for support by healthcare practitioners and communities agencies, with 65% identifying counselling services as most necessary form of support (Yee, Marshall, & Vo, 2014).

Despite this growing need, there is a significant service gap supporting the specific needs of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers. Additionally, community agencies that aim to support LGBTQ refugees and asylum are chronically under funded or do not receive consistent funding and operate above staff and resource capacity.

3.1 EYO’s work with LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers

Over the past three years, EYO has noted an increase in the number of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers looking for support from community agencies like Egale. Specifically, individuals report looking for the following type of support:

- Tailored services to support the transition into Canadian social, economic, and cultural life.
- Trauma and violence informed therapeutic services that are inclusive of LGBTQ identities and experiences
- Access to comprehensive housing, employment, and healthcare services that are knowledgeable of refugee and asylum seeker experiences and healthcare needs,
- Settlement support services, including access to settlement workers and support with ongoing documentation.
• A sense of safety as a member of the LGBTQI2S community

Due to EYO’s history of working with and supporting LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers, the number of referrals to EYO has significantly increased over the past year. Specifically, EYO receives referrals from other community agencies, legal professionals, peer word of mouth, physicians, and self-referrals. Through these referral networks, LGBTQ refugee service users have primarily sought out EYO initially for settlement and mental health support, including:

• Crisis counselling support
• Letters of support from community agencies;
• Translation and settlement related application support;
• Safe social space to meet peers, learn from their peers, and expand their social networks.

The manner in which LGBTQ refugee service users reach EYO is therefore significant. As LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers expend the initial support services offered by other organizations, they seek out EYO through referrals for ongoing support beyond the initial needs of settlement. In this way, LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers navigate a Refugee Continuum, wherein their needs and the service providers who can best respond to those needs both change. It is essential that the Canadian Government recognize that every stage of this continuum - including ongoing support and service delivery from agencies like EYO - requires funding and resources to effectively address the developing needs of LGBTQ refugee and asylum seekers as they live and grow in Canada.

Based on client feedback, EYO also developed additional programs to further support LGBTQ refugees and asylm seekers:

1) Perception, an English speaking support group which provided integration skills into Canadian society

2) Tea and Talk, a support group to provide integration skills into Canada available in Arabic.

These programs provided the opportunity to build a relationship and better understand service users’ health, wellbeing, specific needs, and provided the opportunity to build social networks. Moreover, through this process, many service users have come back to offer peer support to others in similar situations. This emerging peer support feedback loop provides meaningful opportunities to these individuals to develop transferable skills and reduces social isolation.

Additionally, Egale has conceptualized another project, the Egale Centre, to strengthen and address the current gaps within the Refugee Continuum, specifically access to inclusive housing. The Egale Centre will be Canada’s first and Toronto's only facility to combine the proven counselling of Egale Youth Outreach (EYO) with emergency and transitional housing that is exclusively dedicated to serving LGBTQI2S youth. Residents at Egale Centre will have access to on-site counselling and
ongoing case management and participate in a range of programs that are designed to build resiliency and skills needed for the transition to long-term, stable housing.

Egale Youth Outreach (EYO) will integrate with Egale Centre and serve as the primary intake source for short and long term residents at Egale Centre. EYO will continue to deliver its cutting-edge model that combines drop-in and appointment-based crisis counselling with peer support in an environment that is exclusively dedicated to serving LGBTQI2S youth (16-29) who are homeless, about to become homeless, or are precariously housed.

Egale Centre in Toronto is intended to be a proof of concept for expansion to other regional hubs across Canada, which will offer the Canadian Government the opportunity to collaborate to ensure that LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers are supported beyond their arrival to Canada. As a result, the Canadian Government can take a holistic approach to providing services necessary for LGBTQ Refugees to start their life in Canada.

### 5.0 Recommendations

Overall, Egale offers three key recommendations in improving the settlement processes for LGBTQ refugees:

1) Long-term government investments and consistent funding that supports the ongoing support of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers at all stages of the settlement process, including:

- crisis and ongoing trauma counselling;
- mental health counselling;
- housing support workers to help LGBTQ refugees find inclusive housing; and
- settlement workers to help with comprehensive needs related to the settlement process.

2) Launch a large scale and national needs assessment to identify the needs of LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers that will empower these individuals and better support them throughout the settlement process with components that:

- Collect relevant and ethical data;
- Inform decision makers and program design;
- Establish meaningful evaluation parameters; and
• Disseminate to community agencies and service providers.

3) Introduce government investments directed into systems innovations and sustainability by:

• supporting the development, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of innovative ways to provide support (both in person as well as online) as well as different modalities of therapy such as somatic, online counselling, and peer support; and

• supporting the development and implementation of training for other community agencies and housing to provide inclusive support so that staff are educated and familiar with practices when supporting LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers.
6.0 Works Cited


