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Families: Challenges and Progress*

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## The Changing Landscape for LGBTIQ Families

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“Once people begin to see the similarities between themselves and others, instead of focusing on differences, they come to recognize that equality is essentially a matter of human rights and human dignity.”

- Congressman John Lewis, 5/10/2012

The sentiment embedded in the quote above from Congressman John Lewis crystalizes for us a summary of why the theme issue on LGBTIQ issues is necessary and so important for the *Journal of Family Strengths* (JFS) to publish at this pivotal time in our nation’s history. Much has been accomplished but the gains remain fragile and while progress may have occurred, its continued advancement is not assured. In an era where bluster, conventional wisdom, “saying what’s on your mind” seem to pose as strength and leadership, it is affirming to read the words of a civil rights leader and American hero such as John Lewis who has personally risked much and who drew upon his own deep character and moral commitment to stand up, call for equity and demand that we step up and improve both in our views and in our actions.

Professionals in human services, criminal justice, education and healthcare shoulder an enormous responsibility to practice at a high standard of care and to stay informed in order to effectively serve the populations and the individuals that we seek to serve. In addition, we need to be informed so that we can respect and support those colleagues among us who may come from different backgrounds. Towards that end, individuals from within the LGBTIQ community are very much among those populations and are those individuals that we seek to serve. And, some of our colleagues may or may not share with us that they too identify with the LGBTIQ community. Responsible practice requires us as professionals to educate ourselves and to move beyond anecdote and prior notions that we might have acquired by way of our past experience. Instead, we should be systematic in our approach to staying informed about the challenges and issues that may be impacting the people with whom we encounter in our professional settings. Over the past decades the call for evidence-based practice, for evidence informed strategies, and for a focus on the imperative to measure and continuously improve outcomes has been quite prominent and a significant driver towards performance improvement. Recognizing that individuals who identify

themselves as LGBTIQ are in our settings, either as clients or as co-workers, we need to take the necessary steps to seek out the evidence that can drive our professional attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and decisions. We are reminded of the wisdom expressed by the famed economists, Paul Samuelson and John Maynard Keynes who are ascribed as saying “as I find new information I change my mind; What do you do?” What do you do indeed? This special issue of JFS is meant to ask “what do we do as professionals in criminal justice, human services, education and health care when we learn new information that calls for attention in our evidence based practice? Do we change our minds and pursue ever more informed practice, or do we ignore emerging evidence and cast our gaze towards more comfortable less controversial aspects of practice?”

### **Compelling Evidence**

The topics covered in this themed to issue cover a lot of ground and the brief excerpts from several of the articles in this JFS volume make a compelling case for reading on:

- “Lived experience generates knowledge not available through formal education and training. In order to effectively engage lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth and young adults (YYA) experiencing homelessness, meet their needs, and help facilitate their successful transition out of homelessness, they must be partners in the creation of solutions meant to help them.”
- “Often, special education teachers are at a loss about how to educate LGBTQ students with disabilities.”
- “While certain characteristics are similar, students who report being bullied due to their sexual orientation experience more frequent negative repercussions those not targeted in this way”
- “Same-sex parents are compelled to be more reflective, to plan, and to negotiate their contact with mainstream service providers and professionals in an effort to find those whom they feel comfortable with disclosing their sexuality and/or to find a service

provider who would adequately understand their unique needs.”

- “Emerging adults with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) identity are at greater risk for engaging in suicide-related behaviors. This disparity highlights a need to elucidate specific risk and protective factors associated with suicide-related behaviors among GLB youth, which could be utilized as targets for suicide prevention efforts in this population.”
- “Transgender people hear that they do not belong in faith circles because of the rules, dictated by an interpretation of Scripture, that say they “are confused” or are “an abomination” and “sinners.” This causes people to wonder about their belonging, their ability to remain faithful and their self-worth as spiritual beings.”
- “LGBTQ youth are vulnerable to nearly all forms of childhood maltreatment and trauma and are disproportionately overrepresented in the child welfare system.”

### **Call to Action**

The purpose of this JFS issue is to assure our professional knowledge around a population of individuals that we work with and serve in professional settings. It would be a naïve hope in our ever increasing polarized political environment to view LGBTIQ issues as neutral and without controversy. These articles advance our understanding of some of the experiences, some of the issues, some of the challenges that individuals who identifies LGBTIQ may have as professionals we are obligated to understand the challenges that confront the people we work with and that we serve. Harkening back to Congressman John Lewis, another quote related to the civil rights framework from which to view the importance of this topic is: “I fought too long and too hard against discrimination based on race and color, not to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity” (HRC, 2016) Who among us would be comfortable with professional practice that varied the rigor offered to clients based on gender or color or national origin or veteran

status? In like turn, we must be cautious about approaches to LGBTIQ issues that diminish the reality of the experiences of these individuals and that marginalize the entire population based on sound bites, political rhetoric and an unwillingness to “find new information and change our minds” The question remains: what do you do?

### **References**

HRC Staff (2016). *10 Inspiring Quotes from Congressman John Lewis on LGBTQ Rights*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrc.org/blog/10-inspiring-quotes-from-congressman-john-lewis-on-lgbtq-rights>