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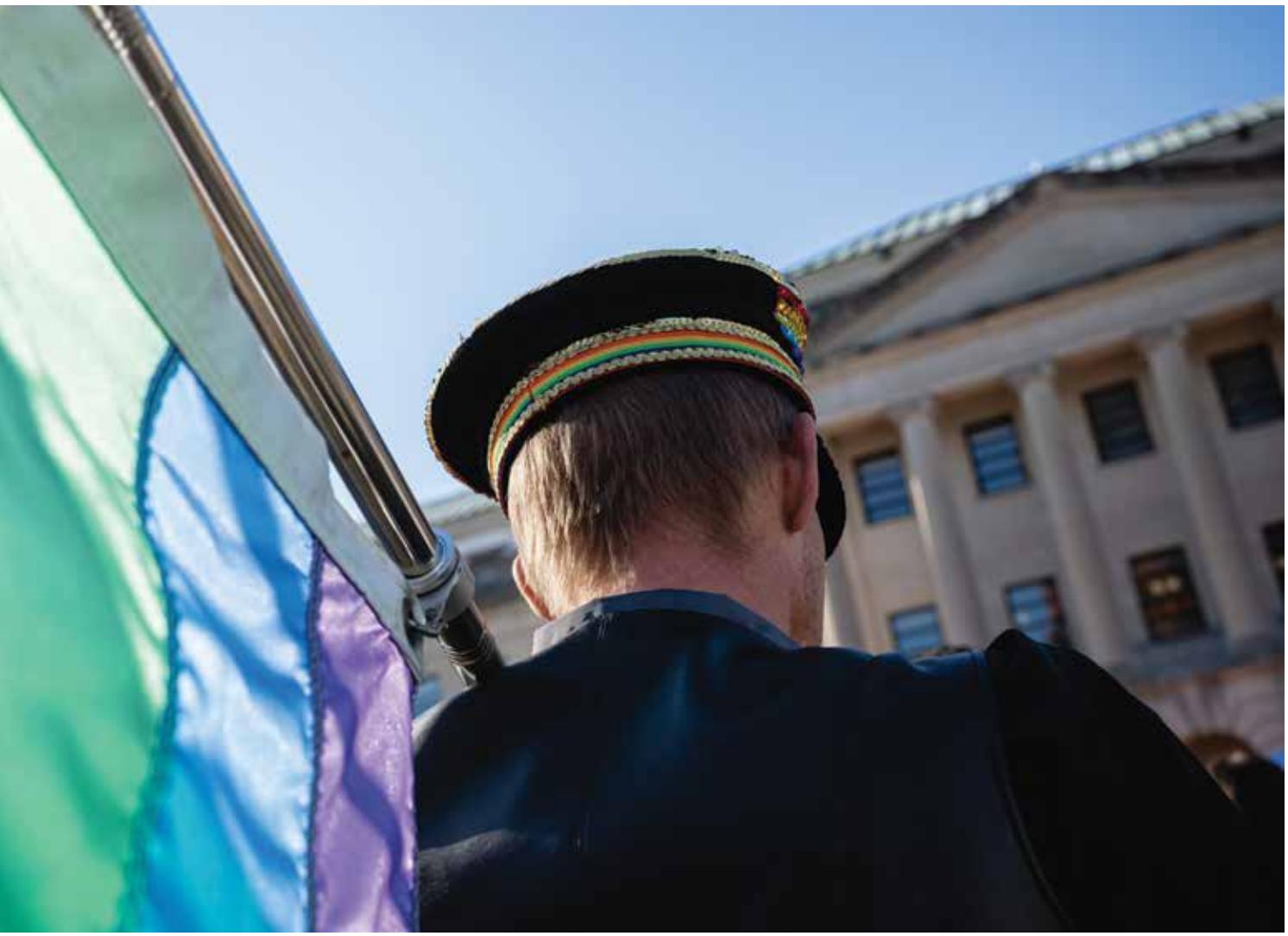
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KNOW ME BEFORE YOU NEED ME



Images courtesy of
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The Value of LGBTQ+ Law Enforcement Liaison Programs

IN AN ERA WHERE COMMUNITY TRUST SERVES AS THE CORNERSTONE OF EFFECTIVE POLICING, POLICE AGENCIES ACROSS THE GLOBE ARE RECOGNIZING THAT BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITIES REQUIRES INTENTIONAL, SUSTAINED EFFORT.

The concept of “know me before you need me” has never been more relevant than in the context of LGBTQ+ community relations, where historical tensions and contemporary challenges demand proactive engagement strategies that extend far beyond crisis response.

The establishment of LGBTQ+ police liaison programs represents a strategic investment in community trust-building that yields dividends across multiple dimensions of police operations. These programs create dedicated pathways for communication, foster understanding between the police and LGBTQ+ communities, improve recruitment and retention of employees, and provide agencies with specialized expertise to navigate complex social dynamics that impact both public safety and organizational effectiveness.

THE FOUNDATION OF TRUST

In the United States, the relationship between the police and the LGBTQ+ community has been marked by more than a century of mistrust, rooted in historical persecution, discriminatory practices, and violent confrontations dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. Based on this history, the LGBTQ+ community often views the police with skepticism and fear. This historical context creates unique challenges for contemporary police leaders who recognize the value of community policing, procedural justice, and need for the active participation and trust of all community members.

Trust-building with the LGBTQ+ community cannot be accomplished through reactive measures alone. When agencies wait until a crisis occurs to engage with LGBTQ+ community members, they often find themselves operating from a deficit of credibility and understanding. The “know me before you need me” philosophy emphasizes the critical importance of

establishing relationships during times of calm, creating foundations of mutual understanding that can withstand the pressures of challenging circumstances, such as those experienced after the deaths of Rodney King, Eric Garner, George Floyd, and others.

LGBTQ+ liaison positions are not new to policing. The San Francisco, California, Police Department was the first to create such a position back in 1962. Research conducted by Out to Protect in 2020 revealed that while many police agencies in the United States had established LGBTQ+ liaison positions, few had formalized policies, procedures, or training programs to guide these efforts. The gap between intention and implementation highlights the need for structured approaches to community engagement that ensure consistency, sustainability, and measurable outcomes.

THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF LGBTQ+ LIAISON PROGRAMS

LGBTQ+ police liaison programs serve multiple strategic functions that extend far beyond simple community relations. These programs create institutional mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, provide specialized expertise for complex investigations, and demonstrate organizational commitment to inclusive policing practices.

From an operational perspective, LGBTQ+ liaisons serve as force multipliers who enhance the agency's capacity to serve all community members effectively. They provide cultural competency training to personnel; support investigators working on hate crimes, domestic violence, sexual assaults, and other sensitive cases; and offer guidance on policies and procedures that impact LGBTQ+ employees and community members. This specialized knowledge becomes particularly valuable when agencies encounter situations involving LGBTQ+ youth, transgender individuals, or hate-motivated incidents that require a nuanced understanding of community dynamics. This can be especially critical when a high-profile emergency or crime occurs in the community.

The liaison role also creates opportunities for proactive crime prevention and community safety initiatives. By maintaining regular contact with LGBTQ+ community organizations, liaisons can identify emerging safety concerns, share crime prevention information, and coordinate responses to issues that disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ individuals. This intelligence-gathering function enhances situational awareness and enables agencies to deploy resources more effectively.

Perhaps most importantly, LGBTQ+ liaison programs humanize policing by providing community members with a specific point of contact who understands their unique concerns and experiences. This personal connection demystifies the police as an institution and makes services more accessible to individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to seek police assistance.

INSTITUTIONALIZING SUCCESS THROUGH PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

The sustainability of LGBTQ+ liaison programs depends on their integration into the agency's organizational structure, operational framework, and culture. The nonprofit Out to Protect has developed comprehensive accreditation standards that provide agencies with a roadmap for establishing and maintaining effective liaison programs based on documented best practices.

The accreditation model emphasizes several critical elements that distinguish successful programs from well-intentioned but unsustainable efforts. First, effective liaison programs require **formal position descriptions** that clearly define roles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships. The liaison must be functionally accountable to the agency's chief executive or second-in-command, ensuring that the position carries sufficient organizational authority to be effective.

Second, successful programs establish **dedicated communication pathways** that include specific email addresses, phone numbers, and web-based platforms for community interaction. These communication tools must be position-specific rather than individual-specific, ensuring continuity when personnel changes occur. The accreditation standards require liaisons to maintain



LGBT Awareness For Law Enforcement Training For Trainers



current rosters of LGBTQ+ community leaders and organizations, creating institutional knowledge that transcends individual assignments.

Third, effective liaison programs emphasize **consistent community engagement** throughout the year, not just during Pride Month or in response to specific incidents. The accreditation standards require liaisons to participate in LGBTQ+ community events during at least five different months annually and to meet regularly with community leaders representing diverse segments of the LGBTQ+ population, including schools, faith organizations, LGBTQ+ centers, Pride organizations, and business leaders.

Fourth, LGBTQ+ liaisons provide **LGBTQ+ awareness training** for new and incumbent employees. This training provides language and problem-solving strategies for effectively serving members of the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in ongoing trust-building between the police and the community.

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The effectiveness of LGBTQ+ liaison programs depends heavily on the quality of training provided to designated personnel. Recognizing this critical need, Out to Protect established the LGBT Liaison Academy in 2022 to provide specialized training for police personnel assigned to liaison roles.

Historically, agencies often assigned personnel to liaison roles without providing specific training on how to build and maintain community relationships, navigate cultural sensitivities, or operate effective outreach programs. The LGBT Liaison Academy's curriculum includes three comprehensive classes that guide participants through every aspect of building and sustaining successful liaison programs.

The training program emphasizes practical skills development alongside cultural competency education. Participants learn how to conduct effective community meetings, develop strategic partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations, and create communication strategies that reach diverse segments of the community. The curriculum also addresses the internal aspects of the liaison role, including how to provide LGBTQ+ awareness training to agency personnel and how to support LGBTQ+ employees within the organization.

One of the academy's most valuable components focuses specifically on program development and sustainability. This class guides participants through the process of building liaison programs based on documented best practices, ensuring that new programs avoid common pitfalls and incorporate proven strategies for success. The emphasis on sustainability addresses one of the most significant challenges facing liaison programs: maintaining effectiveness and continuity as personnel assignments change.

The academy also provides training on hate crimes investigation, recognizing that LGBTQ+ liaisons often play crucial support roles in cases involving bias-motivated incidents. This specialized training enhances the liaison's ability to provide meaningful assistance to investigators while ensuring that victims receive culturally competent services throughout the investigative process.

BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITY

Effective LGBTQ+ liaison programs create value for police agencies that extends far beyond community relations. Liaisons serve as internal resources who enhance organizational capacity across multiple functional areas, from human resources management to training, recruitment, and professional development.

Within the human resources context, LGBTQ+ liaisons provide expertise on issues affecting LGBTQ+ employees, including workplace policies, benefits administration, and discrimination prevention. They advise leadership on best practices for recruitment and creating inclusive workplace environments. They serve as advocates for LGBTQ+ personnel who may face unique challenges in traditionally conservative organizational cultures.

The liaisons' training function represents another significant source of internal value. Effective liaisons provide LGBTQ+ awareness and hate crimes training for agency personnel, including basic academy programs and citizen academy initiatives. This training enhances the cultural competency of all personnel while reducing the likelihood of incidents that could damage community relationships or expose the agency to liability.

LGBTQ+ liaisons also support recruitment efforts by serving as visible representatives of the agency's commitment to diversity and inclusion. They participate in recruitment events within LGBTQ+ communities and help create marketing materials that communicate the agency's welcoming culture to potential applicants. This recruitment function addresses the practical need for personnel who reflect the communities they serve.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

While participation in Pride events and other ceremonial activities represents an important aspect of LGBTQ+ liaison work, effective programs emphasize sustained engagement strategies that create ongoing value for community members. The most successful liaisons develop comprehensive outreach programs that address practical safety concerns while building long-term relationships with community stakeholders.

Crime prevention programming represents one of the most valuable services that LGBTQ+ liaisons can provide to their communities. By developing educational materials and presentations that address crimes disproportionately affecting LGBTQ+ individuals, liaisons create tangible value that extends beyond symbolic gestures. These programs might address issues such as online safety,



hate crime and domestic violence reporting, or personal security strategies for individuals who may be targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Effective liaisons also establish regular communication schedules with community organizations, ensuring that relationship building occurs consistently rather than episodically. These regular touchpoints create opportunities for information sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and early identification of emerging issues that might require police attention.

The liaison's community engagement role also includes serving as a bridge between the agency and LGBTQ+ youth, who may face unique challenges in their interactions with the police. Young LGBTQ+ individuals often experience multiple layers of vulnerability, including family rejection, school-based bullying, and housing instability. LGBTQ+ liaisons who understand these dynamics can provide more effective services while helping other personnel develop appropriate response strategies.

MEASURING SUCCESS

The value of LGBTQ+ liaison programs can be measured through multiple metrics that demonstrate both community impact and organizational benefits. Community-focused metrics might include the number of LGBTQ+ community events attended, the frequency of meetings with community leaders, and the reach of crime prevention programming. These quantitative measures provide concrete evidence of program activity and community engagement levels.

More sophisticated assessment strategies examine qualitative outcomes such as changes in community trust levels, improvements in hate crime reporting rates, and feedback from community partners regarding the quality of police services. These measures require more complex data collection strategies but provide deeper insights into program effectiveness and areas for improvement.

Internal metrics focus on the liaisons' contributions to organizational goals, including the number of personnel trained on LGBTQ+ issues, the liaisons' involvement in hate crime investigations, and the liaisons' participation in recruitment activities. These measures demonstrate the program's value to agency leadership while identifying opportunities for expanded internal engagement.

The accreditation process itself serves as a comprehensive assessment tool that evaluates program effectiveness across multiple dimensions. Agencies pursuing accreditation must document their compliance with established standards while demonstrating continuous improvement in their liaison programs. This external validation provides credibility that enhances the program's legitimacy both within the organization and in the broader community.

There are several excellent examples of effective LGBTQ+ liaison programs in policing agencies around the United

States. The Orange County Sheriff's Office in Florida was the first to receive accreditation of its program and offers an ideal model for large agencies. The Denver, Colorado, Police Department; Waco, Texas, Police Department; Miami, Florida, Police Department; Largo, Florida, Police Department; and Rohnert Park, California, Department of Public Safety have accredited programs that offer excellent models for agencies of various sizes and demographics.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Police agencies considering the establishment of LGBTQ+ liaison programs should approach implementation strategically, recognizing that successful programs require both initial investment and ongoing commitment. The first step involves conducting an honest assessment of organizational readiness, including leadership support, available resources, and existing community relationships.

Agencies should begin by developing formal position descriptions that clearly define the liaisons' roles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships. This documentation ensures that the program has institutional support and provides guidance for personnel selection and performance evaluation. The position description should emphasize the liaisons' accountability to senior leadership while providing sufficient flexibility to respond to community needs and emerging opportunities.

Personnel selection represents another critical implementation decision that significantly impacts program success. While assigned liaisons need not be members of the LGBTQ+ community, they must demonstrate genuine commitment to building inclusive relationships and possess the interpersonal skills necessary for effective community engagement. The selection process should mirror procedures used for other specialized assignments within the agency, ensuring consistency and fairness while identifying candidates with appropriate qualifications.

Training represents an essential component of successful implementation that should begin immediately upon personnel assignment. Out to Protect offers the LGBT Liaison Academy at zero cost for police agencies in the United States thanks to grant funding provided by the Matthew Shepard Foundation. All three classes included in the academy are certified by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. In addition, Out to Protect provides a national LGBTQ+ liaison network for liaisons to problem-solve and learn together. This, too, is available at zero cost to police professionals.

THE PATH FORWARD

The establishment of LGBTQ+ liaison programs represents just the beginning of a longer journey toward building authentic, sustainable partnerships between

the police and LGBTQ+ communities. The attributes of a successful liaison program described in this article are not unique to LGBTQ+ people and can be replicated with any underserved identity group within the community. Success requires ongoing commitment from agency leadership, continuous professional development for liaison personnel, and regular assessment of program effectiveness and community impact.

The “know me before you need me” philosophy demands that agencies view community engagement as a core operational function rather than an ancillary activity. This perspective requires an investment in resource allocation, policy development, and performance measurement systems that support sustained relationship-building efforts. It also requires that organizational cultures be grounded in the principals of procedural justice and community policing as essential elements of effective policing.

The future of policing depends on the profession's ability to build and maintain trust with all community members. LGBTQ+ liaison programs provide police leaders with practical tools for achieving this goal while demonstrating organizational commitment to the principles of equality, inclusion, and service that define professional policing at its best. For agencies ready to make this commitment, the resources and support systems exist to ensure success. The question

is not whether agencies can afford to invest in LGBTQ+ liaison programs, but whether they can afford not to make this investment in their communities' futures. □

LEARN MORE

Out to Protect is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the mission of supporting LGBTQ+ members of law enforcement and to strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and the LGBTQ+ community. Out to Protect provides professional development for law enforcement, grants to law enforcement agencies, and scholarships to LGBTQ+ people pursuing a law enforcement career.

www.outtoprotect.org

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