



Brian O'Gary of Lightwell Therapy, a mental health clinic in North Little Rock, writes on a whiteboard in his office on Wednesday. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Staci Vandagriff)

Study shows need for affirmative care

LGBTQ+ youth suicide risk targeted

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A portion of Arkansas' mental health care providers have prioritized providing "affirmative care" to the state's LGBTQ+ community, whose rates of suicide and mental health issues are reportedly higher than the national average.

For the sixth year in a row, a [national survey](#) from the Trevor Project has reported a "significant association between anti-LGBTQ+ victimization and the disproportionately high rates of suicide risk — and that far too

many young people struggle to access the mental health care they need."

The study found that 39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.

A [2022 survey](#) by the Trevor Project showed the rate of attempted suicides by young LGBTQ+ people in Arkansas was 48%. Additionally, 74% had experienced anxiety symptoms and 62% had experienced depression symptoms.

The Trevor Project, a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco, has been a leading voice in the LGBTQ+ community. See CARE, Page 5A

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in California that works to provide suicide prevention and crisis intervention for LGBTQ+ young people, releases its "Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People" survey annually. The most recent survey broken up by state was conducted in 2022.

Brian O'Gary, a social worker based in North Little Rock, called the numbers "alarming."

"If those numbers were matching what we see in the general population, I think that we would be much more aggressive in making sure that stories about mental health are posted in the newspaper," he said.

Affirmative care or therapy, according to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, is "an approach to therapy that embraces a positive view of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities and relationships and addresses the negative influences that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism have on the lives of LGBTQ clients."

Counselors and social workers seeking to provide affirmative care can learn through professional development workshops how to better speak with LGBTQ+ clients about any problem they may need to discuss. Some LGBTQ+ providers also choose to share their own lived experiences when speaking with clients.

Providing affirmative care can help clients' therapies progress, several local providers said. The ability to be honest and vulnerable with a clinician allows providers to better know their clients and more efficiently provide care.

"I do think for members of the LGBTQ community it can be difficult to know who is affirming of their community, especially in a red state. I think it's important for people to feel like they can find a safe space and that I'm not going to try to shame them for how they identify or talk them out of how they identify," said Shelley Simmons, a social worker in Fayetteville who has been working in the mental health field for about 18 years.

Besides being knowledgeable about what identities are included in the LGBTQ+ community, providers also keep up with local and national politics. Findings in the Trevor Project's national survey and local providers have said there is a connection between anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Access to care is also a concern for a lot of LGBTQ+ Arkansans, so some providers aim to market themselves as affirmative in order to reach



Rachel Pinto with Cardinal Counseling talks on the phone in her office in North Little Rock on Tuesday. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Colin Murphy)

those in need. Some providers say announcing that upfront allows them to build rapport with clients faster.

But that does pose possible risks, especially in areas where LGBTQ+ people are not accepted by all people. Some Arkansas providers have to make careful choices about listing themselves as affirmative providers due to fear of backlash.

"I had very supportive, liberal, open-minded people around me. I forget, as I moved here, that that is not a uniform experience for everybody," O'Gary said.

AFFIRMATIVE PROVIDERS

The Trevor Project Survey indicates that the LGBTQ+ youth population is at-risk both nationally and at a local level. But there is affirmative care available in states like Arkansas, despite the risks to providers and that population.

For some providers in Arkansas, this issue hits closer to home because they identify as LGBTQ+. Those providers include Simmons, who said about half of her practice is LGBTQ+ clients.

Simmons said people who call for consultations often want to make sure she is not offering Christian counseling and is affirming, "meaning that I'm supportive of whoever they are on the rainbow."

"Sometimes potential clients are afraid that, if they see a faith-based counselor (typically conservative/fundamentalist Christian in our area), that they are at risk of that counselor trying to 'talk them out' of their LGBTQIA+ identity or potentially using biblical scripture as evidence that their identity is sinful or wrong," Simmons said.

"At worst, I have had clients who have inadvertently received 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapy in which therapists claiming to have the client's best interest at heart seek to change their

sexual or gender identity. Such practices are extremely harmful to those in the LGBTQIA+ community and are considered unlawful now in many states.

"When I assure potential clients that I am an affirmative provider, I often have to reassure them that we will not talk about anything to do with religion or scripture unless they bring those topics into sessions themselves," she said.

Kacy Long, a counselor in Searcy, said religion impacts a lot of her work.

"One of the top things I work with — especially in Searcy, which has a religious-affiliated school, Harding — is people trying to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with their sexual identity or gender identity," she said.

Rachel Pinto, a counselor in North Little Rock and the owner and clinical director of Cardinal Counseling, said affirmative care is important because the alternative can be harmful.

Pinto, who uses she/they pronouns, came out as queer and nonbinary in 2012, and started serving LGBTQ+ clients in 2013.

"I actually, as a young adult, sought conversion therapy for myself because I thought I was supposed to, according to what I was hearing from my church and my culture. As a survivor of conversion therapy it is even more important to me to be able to offer a place where people can come and talk through whatever they need to talk through," Pinto said.

Pinto said conversion therapy seeks to change or erase a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

"It has been shown to be really harmful to people, that people are actually worse after conversion therapy than they were before," they said. "There's more self-harm, there's more substance abuse, there's more relationship

problems, more mental health difficulties with depression and anxiety — and a lot of states have outlawed conversion therapy, but Arkansas hasn't yet."

According to Pinto, affirmative care can have a positive impact.

"When you are able to support the client in self-termination, a lot of mental health struggles will fall away. In fact, a lot of the depression, anxiety, stuckness (and) trauma is in response to cultural factors and is in response to feeling shameful, feeling like there's something wrong with them," they said.

Another affirmative care advocate is Angie Young, a social worker in Conway who identifies as queer.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the feeling of belonging and acceptance because some people have never experienced that from anyone in their lives," Young said. "That increases the success rate for mental health (treatment), knowing that there is somebody on your side instead of feeling like nobody's on your side."

Young said rejection uniquely affects the LGBTQ+ community.

"It's the one minority population that has that family rejection," Young said. "Any other minority population, usually their family are the people that are going to stand behind them, but, especially in the South, we live with people who are so religious that they will shun their family members if they are a part of this community because they believe it's a choice."

"Sometimes I'm people's only safe space, which hurts my heart for them, but it's such an honor to be a safe space," she said.

Long, the counselor from Searcy, said fear of rejection from a mental health professional can impact the level of care clients receive.

"Many of my clients have

been to clinicians in the past and they felt like, because of the area that we live in or the religious influences of the town, that they could not disclose their sexual identity, orientation or gender identity with their therapist, which can hugely impede the progress of therapy, if you're not able to feel safe with your clinician," she said.

"It is difficult for us to make any change or to work through any kind of trauma if our nervous systems are on high alert and feel as if we're being threatened. Our brains cannot learn when we are feeling threatened," Long said.

Additionally, affirmative care can be difficult to find in Arkansas, she said.

"Unfortunately, because a lot of people are unsafe, finding resources can sometimes be about who you know. In Searcy, I can think of one other queer-affirming provider, and that's it," Long said.

PROVIDERS AT RISK

Several providers said the decision to be open about offering affirmative care can be a difficult one, as it can lead to backlash and put their safety at risk.

"I think a lot of people are also concerned with advertising themselves or marketing themselves as LGBTQ-affirming because that also puts your business at risk because of the general beliefs of the community," Long said. "Being an affirming business in Searcy is a little risky because of the strongly held community beliefs against it."

Simmons noted similar concerns.

"I do sometimes worry about being targeted as an affirmative provider," she said, "but it's more important to me to be identified as somebody that is affirming for members of the LGBTQ+ community."

O'Gary feels that, while mental health care is accessible to LGBTQ+ Arkansans, it is not being fully utilized.

"The question I would ask is 'do they feel comfortable accessing it?'" he said. "Do they believe that their information is going to be kept safe? Are they going to encounter religious overtones when they go in there?"

Several of the mental health professionals interviewed by the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette recommended that LGBTQ+ Arkansans in need of mental health care reach out to local LGBTQ+ community members or organizations for provider recommendations.

If you or a loved one is an LGBTQ+ teen experiencing a mental health crisis, assistance is available on the The Trevor Project's [website](https://www.thetrevorproject.org), or by calling 1-866-488-7386, or texting START to 678-678.