

Last month, the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners approved a partnership with the Advocacy Team for Sexual Minority Youth. This fledgling organization intends to formulate an overarching strategy for assisting gay, lesbian, bi, trans and questioning kids and their families.

Meanwhile, the 10-year effort necessary to achieve this goal is now under the threat of a budgetary crisis affecting the county. Team member Jim Clay is calling for all people who understand the challenges of sexual minority youth to make their voices heard. "It's now even more important for adult sexual minority people to stand up and say, 'This is important,'" he says.

The team is moving ahead despite the threat of lost funding. Its primary objective at this early stage is to prepare an action plan on how to use the resources available.

The risks of not acting are well understood.

"As a county it is our responsibility to support and advocate for all our youth," County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey says. "Sexual minority youth are at the greatest risk of suffering and feeling isolated and alone. Among youth they have highest suicide rate. I am committed to protecting their rights and ensuring that support and resources are made available to them."

The team is a blend of high school, college and adult members. Other groups have not included sexual minority youth in the process.

"In the past, youth have criticized adults for overtaking these projects," one team member says. "While we embrace the goal of youth decision making, adults still need to guide the decisions and logistics."

The team holds monthly meetings. Everyone is welcome, says Katie Jambor, a high school student who serves as co-chair with Kamron Graham.

THE ADVOCATES

Budget crisis threatens newly formed team for sexual minority youth

by Kelly Reilly



Multnomah County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey greets some of the kids who will benefit from the Advocacy Team for Sexual Minority Youth

Especially needed are people with computer, organizing and marketing skills. "In particular, older queers who remember what it was like to be queer and young are key," Jambor says.

Clay adds: "It is not the mission of the team to focus on individual projects. There are a lot of great projects out there. We think the most value will be had through figuring out how to advocate solutions and grow the resources. But the key thing to keep in mind is that the team is not a

project organization. Really, it's an attempt to operate at a higher level, to advocate certain approaches to winning the involvement of sexual minority youth and to connect them with older queers who have the financial means to help."

The team has several key goals:

- **Creating safety in schools.** They often are described by sexual minority youth as frightening places of terror and abuse.
- **Developing appropriate social activities.**

The team will work to promote stability and safety, provide practical support and formulate quality standards.

• **Assessing the system.** The team's manifesto points out that direct services for sexual minority youth require "heroic and unsustainable efforts" and that they "are developed in haphazard ways, relying on the good will of advocates at risk of burnout and financial failure." Members will conduct an independent assessment and identify opportunities for improvement in the coming year.

To get things moving, the team sought \$200,000 in initial funding and received about one-quarter of that amount. But Clay is quick to point out: "We have no funds. Instead we recommend how others might invest their funds, so that all investors are aimed in the same direction."

Although the earmarked funding is way below the level required to meet its goals, the organization already has been using some of its resources to help keep the Sexual Minorities Youth Recreation Center's doors open. SMYRC receives no support from the city or the county.

"It's become almost a cliché that life for sexual minority youth is tough," a team member says. "This is certainly true enough, but now it's only half the story. It's also an exciting time when young people are being given opportunities to shape their world in regard to education, health care, recreation, employment, etc. and work together with adults to create community." □

The ADVOCACY TEAM FOR SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH meets 5 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month at the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, 2100 S.E. Belmont St.

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