

northwest

Pilot Program Launches

Grant funding increases services to queer homeless youth

by Julie Sabatier

Of the estimated 1.6 million homeless youth in the United States, between 20 percent and 40 percent identify as queer, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Anyone who has been downtown knows that Portland has a significant homeless youth population, and local organizations are seeking to meet the needs of queer kids on the street.

With help from a \$43,000 United Way grant awarded in July, Outside In and the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) are teaming up with New Avenues for Youth to assess the needs of queer homeless youth in Portland and to tailor services toward this population.

"We are concerned that there may be a high population of homeless queer youth in Portland who are not accessing homeless youth services," said Outside In associate director Zarod Rominski. "Our concern is that homeless queer youth are trading sex for shelter. We want to provide them with other options so that's not something that they have to do."

One of the project's main components is offering safe spaces for queer homeless youth to gather. Starting Sept. 8, SMYRC will hold drop-in nights for queer homeless youth every Saturday, while New Avenues for Youth will encourage kids to do arts activities such as zine making on Thursday nights. On Tuesdays, Outside In hosts an activity-based night, using grant money to take kids to events such as Gay Skate or queer-friendly open mike nights.

In addition to the hands-on group activities and drop-in nights, the nonprofits are working on research to find out the size of Portland's queer homeless youth population and to ask them what they need in terms of services.

"We're trying to get an understanding of how many queer youth there are out there in the homeless continuum," said Marc Lejeune, project manager at Outside In, who identifies as gender-queer. "A lot of the queer youth are pretty closeted at times and have to be for their safety."

Lejeune explained that homeless youth who identify as queer are directly involved with creat-

ing a questionnaire to be distributed at Outside In, SMYRC, New Avenues for Youth and other shelters and places where homeless youth tend to gather. A separate survey will collect information from service providers about their awareness of the needs of queer homeless youth.

"We don't just want to be queer-friendly, we want to be queer-positive and culturally competent," said Lejeune.

One of the ways Lejeune and his colleagues intend to do this is to involve queer homeless youth in the project as much as possible. "I'm going to have the youth co-facilitate or tell their coming-out stories and get them involved with the training [for service providers]," said Rej Joo, a youth advocate working with both SMYRC and Outside In.

Joo is also helping coordinate focus groups composed of queer homeless youth who can help determine the best way to ask survey questions. The youth, who will also participate in distributing the completed surveys, are compensated for their time with \$5-\$10 Fred Meyer gift cards.

The project is just getting off the ground, and attendance at drop-in nights and focus groups has been spotty. Lejeune says the drop-in nights at Outside In and New Avenues for Youth have brought in between seven and nine kids a night thus far, although he hopes the numbers will go up when SMYRC's Saturday drop-ins begin.

"We know there's more queer youth in the continuum, but not all of them like to attend any kind of formal thing," Lejeune explained. "We want to be able to reach those youth as well. Some of those youth might be more interested in going to SMYRC than anywhere else."

As the project builds momentum and more youth become involved, Joo, Lejeune and others are looking for permanent funding, from the city or perhaps other grants, for queer homeless youth services.

"This is definitely sort of a pilot research grant to determine the need for services," said Lejeune. "Hopefully we'll be able to demonstrate that there's a need and that it should be funded." **JO**



Outside In's Marc Lejeune (left) and youth advocate Rej Joo hope identifying queer homeless youth will lead to stable funding to help kids get off the streets.

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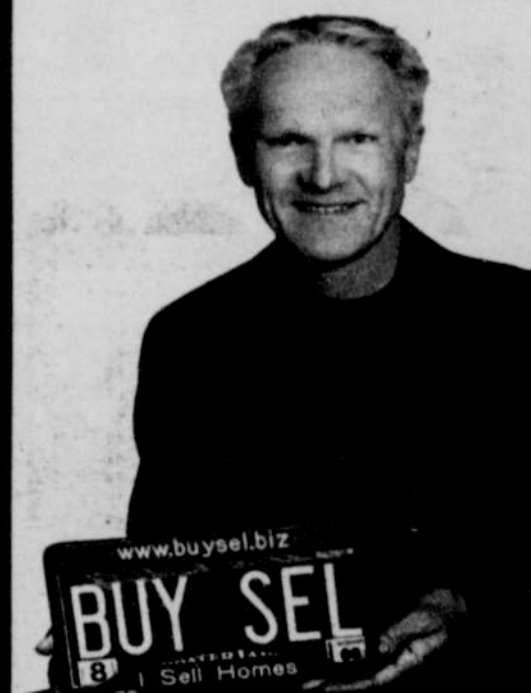
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