

Wanted: a plan to help homeless, LGBT youths **Opinion by Ernesto Portillo Jr.**

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Marie Luna, 20, was once homeless. Her friend Daizy Woodz, 19, is homeless.

Both young women have experienced the difficulty of moving from home to home, from friend to friend and from stranger to stranger.

Being young and homeless is punishing. Being repudiated as a young gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person can be crushing.

Being both is incomprehensible for most people.

The plight of young people found in such a predicament is rarely discussed. Woodz and Luna say it's time Tucson does so.

Kicked out by their families, homeless LGBT youths sleep on the streets, where they're at the risk of assaults by homophobic youths. Youths like Luna and Woodz are prey to predator adults — straight and gay, men and women — who give the scared LGBT kids shelter and food in exchange for sex. And if the discarded youths manage to find a warm bed in a homeless shelter, they may be isolated, or assaulted because of their sexual identity.

Luna, who is bisexual, said homeless LGBT youths deal with these challenges every day. A disproportionate 42 percent of homeless youths are gay or lesbian, according to a recently released national survey. Additional research says homeless youths are also disproportionately bisexual and transgender, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

A 2005 survey by the Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless said 17 percent of homeless youths here are LGBT.

They are hidden in plain sight.

The national task force calls homeless LGBT youths an epidemic. Woodz, who is transgender, calls it "whack." As in out of whack or wrong.

I met Luna and Woodz, both eloquent, strong and honest, at the Eon Youth Center on North Sixth Avenue, across from the Downtown Ronstadt Transit Center. The center is a drop-in space where teens and young adults, most of them LGBT, can safely meet afternoons and evenings.

At night the center locks its door. Those young people who don't have a safe place to go spend the night where they can.

Homeless LGBT youths don't have the support system that homeless straight kids might have, said Courtney Jones, homeless youth advocate at Eon, a joint effort of Wingspan, the Southern Arizona Aids Foundation, CODAC Behavioral Health Services and the Pima County Health Department.

At times LGBT homeless youths don't look the part. They might not be disheveled. And they might be in school, said Jones.

But they remain at risk, she said.

Homeless LGBT youths have limited places to go for shelter because their families shun them or because they find homeless shelters inhospitable to LGBT youths, Jones said.

"That's what unique about LGBT youths," she said.

Woodz and Luna left home while in their mid-teens after enduring physical and emotional abuse from many of the people in their lives.

Woodz recalls that coming out to her mother was met with a slur and a boot from home. LGBT homeless youths try to build each other up. Living on the street tears them down. Drugs and alcohol. Assaults. Sexual exploitation. Lack of sleep and food. These are among the litany of social ills that keep these young people down.

Many of the youths are resilient and survive. But they can't overcome.

The time is now, say Luna and Woodz, for the community to help come up with a plan and a place to help these young people — and all of us — overcome.

They're talking to all of us, and especially parents of LGBT youths.

"It's OK to be who you are. It's not a disease," Woodz said.

And they're asking us to hear them.

"Listen to our voices," Luna said.

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