

# Inclusive Practice Matters: Communities of Practice Responding to the Challenges of Covid-19

Rainbow Health Victoria:  
Evidence + Advocacy + Action

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## Inclusive Practice Matters

Rainbow Health Victoria is a program that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) health and wellbeing through research and knowledge translation, training, resources, policy advice and service accreditation through the Rainbow Tick.

For over 15 years, we have worked to increase the capacity of organisations delivering health and community services to LGBTIQ communities. We are committed to bringing together the latest research knowledge with essential practice insights in LGBTIQ inclusion.

*Inclusive Practice Matters* is a series of practice-based resources which aims to address common questions and challenges in the area of LGBTIQ-inclusive practice by:

- Sharing expertise in LGBTIQ-inclusive practice gathered from organisations and services with proven success
- Promoting best-practice and examples
- Addressing frequently asked questions about LGBTIQ inclusion
- Assisting organisations, service providers and government to implement policies and practical actions to improve LGBTIQ inclusion

## Responding to the Challenges of Covid-19

In this first edition of *Inclusive Practice Matters*, we are reporting on recent experiences in service delivery to LGBTIQ communities in the context of COVID-19 restrictions.

Rainbow Health Victoria supports several professional communities of practice that aim to promote collaboration, share knowledge and resources, and facilitate consultation and advocacy around LGBTIQ-inclusive practice. These groups include:

- Queer Family Violence Sector Network (for those working in family violence services)
- Rainbow Network community of practice (for people working with LGBTIQ+ young people)
- Rainbow Tick community of practice group (for those working towards or interested in Rainbow Tick Accreditation)

Each of these CoP groups held a COVID-19 specific session in April where practitioners could support each other as peers, share experiences and discuss service innovations required as a result of restrictions. Several powerful common themes emerged in these discussions.

Thank you to all the people who participate in these sessions and who are developing and sharing responses and strategies to help us collectively meet the challenges of this time.

## Challenges reported

Practitioners working with LGBTIQ clients reported encountering:

- High levels of distress
- Increases in clients reporting suicidal behaviours and thoughts
- Concerns about support and safety in their homes
- Concerns about job loss
- Anxiety about potential interactions with police enforcing restrictions
- Distress due to decreased access to medical affirmation for trans and gender diverse people

Practitioners also reported common challenges involved in supporting LGBTIQ clients and communities:

- Needing to innovate quickly to support LGBTIQ clients online
- Managing the possible loss of prioritisation for LGBTIQ-inclusive practice
- Looking after practitioners working in LGBTIQ service delivery

While restrictions are easing in some areas, many services will not resume full face-to-face service delivery for some time. With this in mind, community of practice participants shared the following common challenges and innovative strategies for overcoming these. These strategies may or may not be suitable to your context, depending on the situation within your region and organisation, your resources and support.

We hope these provide inspiration to others continuing to work towards LGBTIQ inclusion and support LGBTIQ communities during these challenging times.

## Quick, innovative online support for LGBTIQ clients

Practitioners expressed concerns about ensuring uninterrupted client access to online spaces, as well as ensuring safety, privacy and confidentiality. Challenges included:

- Barriers to access for clients, including lack of reception, data and access to devices
- Maintaining privacy and confidentiality for clients engaging in online consultations or telehealth, including data security and risks to people who may not be 'out' to others in their household who may overhear or have access to their browser history
- Not being able to use visual or more subtle cues to help in risk assessment
- Losing visible physical cues that demonstrate to clients that they are accessing an LGBTIQ-inclusive service

### Solutions and strategies

A range of solutions and strategies to respond were discussed:

- Consider providing brokerage packages to help clients with cost and access to data or devices
- Use virtual backgrounds to help workers and clients maintain privacy and to avoid revealing their location
- Check in with clients about preferred contact and mode of service provision. Some suggested questions to ask clients are:
  - Is it safe for you to have this conversation right now?
  - Do you have a safe and private place to receive this call/video chat?
  - Are there things about privacy and confidentiality that you would like to discuss with me before we meet?
  - What name and pronoun would you like me to use?
- Train all staff members to safely use the chosen platform for client services
- Provide information for staff to share with all clients, e.g. a script at the start of every conversation that outlines privacy and confidentiality protocols and explains the risks of certain platforms

- Review systems to ensure security of data storage
- Some safety in Zoom can be created by not sharing passcodes along with the meeting, setting up waiting rooms, etc.
- Consider making online groups not overtly LGBTIQ-related, for instance calling it a 'wellbeing group', to make it easier for people who are not 'out' to participate without needing to disclose or be outed
- Consider using Facebook groups or other text-based groups which allow for more anonymity than video platforms, while ensuring online safety
- Use sound concealing headphones where there are others working in the same space
- Add your pronoun to your name on zoom meetings
- Display rainbow or LGBTIQ-friendly images and flags as your zoom backgrounds, wear a rainbow lanyard
- Use social media, newsletters and websites to affirm your organisation or program's ongoing support of LGBTIQ people and commitment to safe and inclusive services

## Managing the potential loss of prioritisation for LGBTIQ-inclusive practice

Many practitioners felt that LGBTIQ-inclusive practice could be sidelined in the current climate as an 'optional extra' while organisations focus on crisis management and business continuity.

Practitioners reported:

- Difficulties in maintaining momentum, monitoring progress within their organisations, and ensuring consistency and compliance with staff working remotely
- Delays in LGBTIQ-inclusive practice plans and timeframes, e.g. inclusive practice training delayed or cancelled
- Re-direction of internal resources and staff to address frontline delivery
- Difficulties in maintaining engagement with LGBTIQ-inclusive practice when the whole workforce is dispersed and stressed

### Solutions and strategies

A range of solutions and strategies to respond were discussed:

- Be clear and realistic about what can be accomplished, perhaps creating an interim plan that allows organisations to prioritise and categorise tasks into a short-term and longer-term Rainbow Tick plan
- Focus on learning and development, with online training and engagement opportunities increasingly available
- Prioritise cultural change and internal strategy development where system changes may be difficult to achieve in the current context
- Build momentum through continuing to connect with LGBTIQ communities
- Take small steps and celebrate small wins. This can involve finding outcomes that are easy to get through approvals and then build momentum from there
- Embed LGBTIQ inclusion in all strategy areas to ensure it is considered a core part of all aspects of service delivery and is less vulnerable to push-back

## Looking after practitioners working in LGBTIQ service delivery

Staff working with LGBTIQ clients talked about the additional challenges of working from home or remotely, including the difficulties of balancing work and life, particularly caring or schooling responsibilities. Other challenges included:

- Increased workload and working more frequently with clients presenting with high levels of complexity and risk
- Concern about the lack of accessible peer support for front line workers
- Feeling isolated and alone in driving LGBTIQ inclusion at a time where it has been harder to get buy-in

### Solutions and strategies

A range of solutions and strategies to respond were discussed:

- Join a community of practice group for support and connection
- Build rapport and connection by setting up online team activities
- Establish 'water-cooler' informal online spaces to communicate with peers and across different teams
- Reach out to peers within your organisation, or to people in other organisations in similar roles to yours
- Ask for access to internal or external supervision and support

See our [other resources](#) for tips about how to maintain services that are safe and welcoming for LGBTIQ service users and staff at this time.

## About Rainbow Health Victoria

Rainbow Health Victoria is a program that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) health and wellbeing through research and knowledge translation, training, resources, policy advice and service accreditation through the Rainbow Tick. We are located at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University, and are funded by the Victoria Government.

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