

Rural Community Organizations Building Inclusive Environments for LGBTQ+ Residents

Mariana Tuttle, MPH

Robert Libal, BBA

Madeleine Pick, MPH

Carrie Henning-Smith, PhD, MPH, MSW

Key Findings

- This case series highlights the work of three community-based organizations: Spectrum of Findlay, Ohio, Collidescope in Danville, Virginia, and Olympic Pride in Port Townsend, Washington. The presence of these organizations in rural communities builds connectedness and lays the foundation for awareness, inclusivity, and education around LGBTQ+ issues.
- In this way, community organizations like those highlighted here are precursors to good health and quality of life for LGBTQ+ individuals and families.
- While not yet a universal reality, many rural areas are increasingly embracing LGBTQ+ residents and offering services to support them and unite the greater community.

Purpose

The purpose of this case series is to highlight rural organizations doing exemplary work to build community among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) residents, and create a more inclusive environment in their communities. These may serve as examples to other individuals or organizations considering expanding their LGBTQ+-inclusive programming.

Background and Policy Context

Feeling seen, welcomed, and included in one's community is essential to strong social cohesion and to good health outcomes. However, perceptions of social cohesion vary by sexual orientation, with lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults reporting lower levels of social cohesion, with potentially harmful impacts on their health.¹

Beyond social cohesion, rural LGBTQ+ residents face other barriers to good health,² including higher rates of chronic conditions; more barriers to accessing care, especially LGBTQ+-friendly and gender-affirming care; and less access to LGBTQ+-specific organizations and affinity groups.³ Still, despite the barriers they face, members of the LGBTQ+ population continue to live in rural areas across the US, and information is urgently needed on how best to support their health, well-being, and quality of life.

Community organizations play a key role in providing services and programming in rural communities. This case study series highlights examples of rural community organizations providing LGBTQ+ welcoming and inclusive programming and services from different regions across the U.S. These examples may be helpful to other rural community organizations wanting to deepen their embrace of their LGBTQ+ neighbors and community members.

Approach

For this case study series, we identified organizations working to create connections and build community resources for LGBTQ+ individuals in rural communi-

ties. This was done by a combination of an online environmental scan of existing programs, and contacting rural or health-related organizations of whom we had existing knowledge to ask about exemplar programs. Primary data were collected through key informant interviews, conducted via Zoom between fall 2021 and winter 2022. We analyzed each case study individually in order to identify key themes, including challenges and opportunities related to building community resources for LGBTQ+ individuals in rural communities.

Case #1: Spectrum of Findlay

Rural Community Context

Findlay is the county seat of Hancock County, Ohio and home to approximately 40,000 residents.⁴ It is located in the northwestern region of the state, roughly 40 miles south of Toledo.⁴ Findlay is a hub for several national corporations, including the headquarters of Cooper Tire and Rubber Company, Marathon Petroleum, and Whirlpool's dishwasher manufacturing plant.⁵

Hancock County residents are, on average, among the healthiest Ohioans.⁶ A lower percentage rate their health as "fair or poor" compared with the rest of the state (14% vs. 18%).⁶ Smoking, obesity, and excessive drinking rates are all below the state average.⁶ Measures of education and socioeconomic status, including high school graduation rates, child poverty, and income inequality, are all better in Hancock County than the rest of Ohio.⁶ Demographically, most Hancock County residents are non-Hispanic White (88.9%); the county has a higher than average Hispanic population (5.6%), compared to the rest of the state.⁶

Organizational Overview

Spectrum of Findlay is a nonprofit organization providing support and educational resources to the local LGBTQ+ community in Findlay. They aim to reach all LGBTQ+ people and affirming families in Findlay, and across the northwest region in Ohio. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, they are funded largely through corporate sponsors headquartered in Findlay (e.g. Marathon Petroleum, Cooper Tire, Whirlpool), as well as a series of smaller grants (e.g. Hancock County Community Foundation, ADAMHS Board), and private donations.^{7,8} Spectrum also began receiving state funding in November of 2021 to host an Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator within their organization.⁹

Spectrum of Findlay began in 2003 as a low-key, backyard barbecue style Pride event run through a local church. In 2010 when the church shut down, members

Figure 1: Map of Ohio showing Findlay, OH



of the LGBTQ+ community in Findlay knew the work needed to continue, and Spectrum of Findlay became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Still, it was primarily a small annual Pride celebration until 2016, when they began offering year-round opportunities for community members to engage in educational and advocacy programming. They now offer support groups for LGBTQ+ youth, their parents, and LGBTQ+ adults. In addition to year-round programming, they still offer and have increasingly devoted time and resources to making their Pride celebrations far-reaching and memorable events, even while keeping their community safe and adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their Pride event in 2021 drew a crowd of more than 2,000 individuals, coming from across the region to celebrate.

Key Features

The main goal of Spectrum of Findlay is to create a sense of belonging for the LGBTQ+ community in Findlay, and across the larger northwest Ohio region. Spectrum Program Manager Vy Allen emphasized the centrality of relationships in their work,

"Overall, we're just trying to relationship-build with as many people in the area as we can and connect people and places that might not have been connected otherwise."

Spectrum does this in both virtual and physical spaces, with an active social media presence and virtual meet-ups, as well as services available within their office building. People can make an appointment or drop by the physical location to ask questions about navigating

the health care system or finding LGBTQ+-affirming therapists, for example, or participate in one of the support group sessions led by a licensed provider. Spectrum also does some work in advocating for LGBTQ+-inclusive policies, and works with local schools, especially on anti-bullying efforts.¹⁰

Since 2016, support groups have been a key component of the programming Spectrum offers. Initially, these support groups combined LGBTQ+ youth, parents and allies, and LGBTQ+ adults. However, realizing each had distinct needs and desires in a support group setting, they began to offer separate groups in 2018. Now, they serve more than 200 families and youth, through more than 50 peer and social support groups per year.¹⁰

As their Pride events continue to grow, beyond the actual celebration and donations they provide, the community increasingly sees Spectrum as a resource and is becoming more aware of their services. Allen also highlighted the importance of Pride celebrations as a powerful morale boost for the LGBTQ+ community in northwest Ohio. They plan to bring a safe and celebratory event to Findlay again in 2022.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the clear inroads made in the community, stigma against LGBTQ+ individuals is still present in Findlay and in rural Ohio in general. Allen noted that this is especially pronounced in schools, with battles to start or keep Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) or gender spectrum clubs, opposition from school board members to the use of transgender students' names and pronouns in classrooms, and more. It can be especially challenging for students who do not find support at home or in school; this makes the existence of organizations like Spectrum all the more vital.

In addition to the actual stigma people face, Allen spoke to a perceived stigma in rural, northwest Ohio, "People might look at us and see how we vote, see how our towns are run, and it just doesn't look like an affirming place." This may make people feel that there is not an affirming community waiting for them, but in reality, this is not the case. Spectrum is actively working to make connections and reach more people.

Still, Spectrum finds signs of hope that support for the LGBTQ+ community continues to grow. For example, they have a strong partnership with a local health care organization that does HIV testing; they also work frequently with the substance use and treatment community. Both of these partnerships provided connections to people and organizations they might not have otherwise realized were LGBTQ+-affirming. One of the

most common requests that Spectrum gets is for "safe" providers – those who will not discriminate against someone for being LGBTQ+, and especially those who will provide gender-affirming care to transgender and nonbinary individuals. Some websites, such as the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), do list gender-affirming providers, but a search for Findlay, Ohio yields no results. Since "safe" providers are not widely advertised or designated on clinic websites, Spectrum's interpersonal and organizational connections help enable these recommendations when they may not otherwise be possible.

Finally, connecting to larger LGBTQ+ organizations in Columbus, Dayton, and across Ohio has also meant an opportunity to leverage the social capital and educational resources that come with being a more established resource. For example, Allen discussed the close relationship Spectrum has with Equitas Health, which does statewide LGBTQ+-affirming health care:

"In this partnership, we've brought weekly HIV testing into the Hancock County community, which has created buzz around Equitas as it grows to operate in Northwest Ohio. They are now also partnering with our county Health Department doing testing and training with staff."

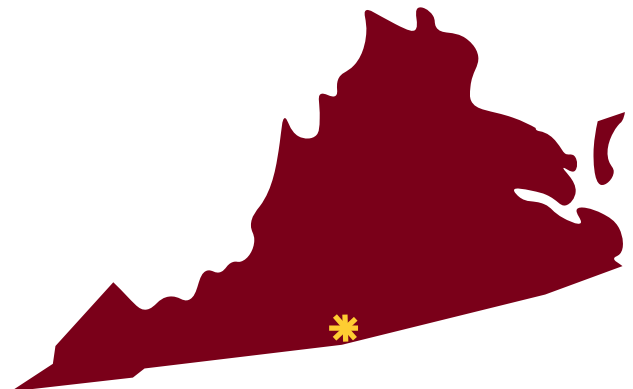
Combining these far-reaching relationships with deep local ties in Findlay, Spectrum aims to continue to grow in their work.

Case #2: Collidescope VA

Rural Community Context

Danville is an independent city in rural, south-central Virginia, along the border with North Carolina; it sits on the fall line of its namesake, the Dan River.⁸ It is home to nearly 43,000 Virginians and is well known for

Figure 2: Map of Virginia showing Danville, VA



its mix of outdoor recreation, historical landmarks, and cultural and entertainment venues.⁹ Demographically, Danville has a higher concentration of non-Hispanic Black residents than across the commonwealth (51% vs 19%), as well as a higher proportion of older adults (21.3% vs. 15.9%).¹⁰

When it comes to health, residents are more likely to face difficulties accessing medical care, as Danville is classified as a medically underserved area and as a health professional shortage area for both mental health services and dental care.¹¹ A higher percentage of Danvillians rate their health as “fair or poor” compared with the rest of the commonwealth (25% vs. 17%).¹⁰ Danville has nearly twice the average rate of premature death compared with the rest of the commonwealth.¹⁰

Organizational Overview

Collidescope VA is a nonprofit serving LGBTQ+ individuals and allies in Danville, Virginia, and the surrounding region.¹² Their mission is “...to grow connectedness to inclusive social events, business related resources, and health opportunities for LGBTQ+ community members in Southern Virginia,” which they achieve in a variety of ways.¹² Collidescope VA was initially born out of this desire for increased connectedness among the LGBTQ+ community in Danville. The first big kickoff for Collidescope was a Pride event in 2018. After a successful celebration, many LGBTQ+ individuals in the Danville area expressed the desire to have an ongoing way to gather, to connect, and to support one another. Collidescope VA is now a 501(c)(3), funded by a combination of grants and donations, as well as some events and direct fundraising.

Key Features

Those who helped start Collidescope connect building community for LGBTQ+ individuals directly to the promotion of better health, quality of life, and wellbeing for not only those individuals, but also for the entire Danville community. As Collidescope Board Member Bryan Price stated,

“We were losing talent, frankly. Young LGBTQ+ artists, creative visionaries, and others who might otherwise settle in Danville were leaving because they felt they did not have a place to belong. In building a community for these folks, Danville gains their membership, and is a far richer area for all they bring.”

Their bi-monthly events range from casual café

gatherings to fun-filled drag karaoke to more relaxed, mindful meditation, and panel events discussing topics like faith and spirituality. Many residents in the Danville community are looking for opportunities to deconstruct some of the beliefs and stigma they face, and more. Price noted that changing hearts and minds takes consistent work over time, and that Danville area residents seem increasingly willing to engage in this process.

Challenges and Opportunities

For LGBTQ+ individuals in Danville and southern Virginia, personal safety remains a concern. This includes overt fears of physical harm, but is more commonly experienced in the form of bullying in schools, fear of discrimination in the workplace, and daily microaggressions. Virginia passed the Virginia Values Act in 2020 to expand non-discrimination protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.¹³ Still, Price notes that some people fear the challenge of taking their employer to court to uphold the legal protections offered, and that stigma is a clear reality for the LGBTQ+ community in southern Virginia.

LGBTQ+ residents are also working toward increased visibility and acknowledgement, meaning having their presence seen and affirmed, and their role in the community solidified. In 2018, the mayor of Danville read a proclamation from the City Council that declared June LGBTQ+ Pride Month in Danville.¹⁴ The open affirmation of support and celebration meant a lot to the community.

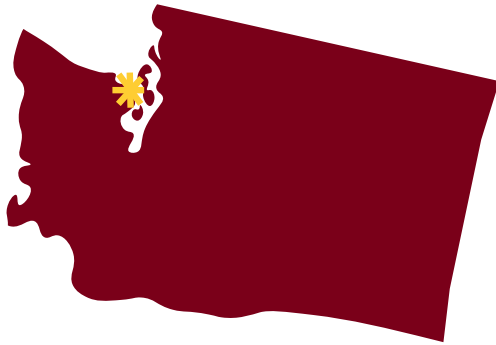
Another important opportunity has come from a relationship with the Virginia Rural Health Association (VRHA).¹⁵ This organization and others like it that are increasingly becoming LGBTQ+ advocates, while not necessarily LGBTQ+-centric, can have a tremendous impact in validating and amplifying the work that Collidescope VA is doing. In particular, VRHA's history, reputation, and reach offers powerful support to the work being done for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies in Danville and across southern Virginia.

Case #3: Olympic Pride

Rural Community Context

Port Townsend, Washington, is the county seat of Jefferson County; it is home to approximately 10,000 Washingtonians.^{16,17} Port Townsend was named one of the “Most Beautiful Small Towns to Visit in the U.S.” with its many Victorian buildings, numerous cultural events, and famous independent maritime center.¹⁸

Figure 3: Map of Washington showing Port Townsend, WA



Jefferson ranks among the healthiest of Washington's 39 counties, with below state averages for health metrics like obesity, physical inactivity, teen births, and sexually transmitted infections.¹⁹ Located on the northeast tip of the Olympic Peninsula, Port Townsend residents live in a health professional shortage area for primary care, mental health care, and dental care, and may face challenges accessing health services.²⁰ Demographically, Port Townsend is primarily non-Hispanic White (88.2%), with a higher concentration of older adult residents than the state average (37.9% vs. 15.9%).¹⁹

Organizational Overview

Olympic Pride is a nonprofit organization serving the LGBTQ+ community in Port Townsend, Washington, and the Olympic Peninsula. Their mission is "... to support the LGBTQ+ community on the Olympic Peninsula through awareness, education, and community engagement."²¹ In 2018, after a successful community event yielded extra funds raised as part of the event, participants voted to use them to establish a LGBTQ+ Pride celebration for the area. This transformed over the next few years to a sustained community non-profit, which serves LGBTQ+ individuals across the Peninsula, with a special focus on its youth. As a 501(c)(3), Olympic Pride is primarily donation-based, from small businesses and individuals, as well as grant supported through the Pride Foundation²² and the Jefferson Community Foundation.²³ The overarching goal of Olympic Pride is the eventual elimination of the inequities experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals on the Olympic Peninsula. More immediately, goals include establishing an even stronger presence, as well as reestablishing a physical gathering space for LGBTQ+ youth.

Just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Olympic Pride had established a drop-by youth center open a couple of afternoons per week. The center was

only ever open twice before it shut down due to COVID-19 safety protocols. Olympic Pride is currently in the midst of gathering resources and funds to reopen a youth center as "an inclusive safe space for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies."²¹ Recently, Olympic Pride helped local youth establish a gender spectrum club at the local high school. The current group of youth are all high school seniors, so helping enable them to pass this group on to younger students is vital. They are eager to continue establishing lasting places of empowerment and acceptance for LGBTQ+ kids.

Much of the initial work to pave the way for LGBTQ+ individuals to find an affirming community in the area was driven by Emelia De Souza, a well-known community leader. A transgender woman of color, she wanted to remain in her community when she transitioned (i.e., from her sex assigned at birth to her gender identity) nearly a decade ago. She was willing to help her neighbors and local health care providers understand and learn about transgender people and their needs, and people were willing to engage and learn. Olympic Pride Executive Director Ellen Caldwell highlighted the importance of Emelia's leadership and the way she laid the groundwork for their organization:

"The way she founded it really set the tone for who we are today; we are here for community connection, living together in respect and celebration of one another."

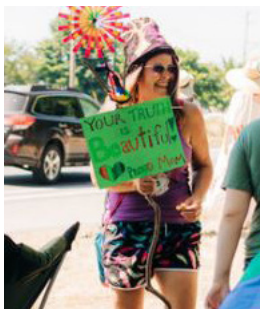
Caldwell recognizes the fortune of the particular rural area they serve; there was a community sentiment that most individuals were already accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals. Olympic Pride members see themselves as starting off from the initial point of acceptance and moving further into awareness and education.

Key Features

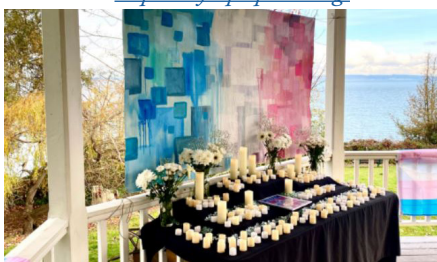
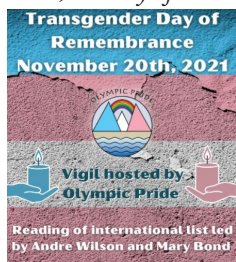
Olympic Pride emphasizes its role as serving the entire community of the Olympic Peninsula. While they exist for the support of LGBTQ+ individuals, they also seek to be part of growing connectedness between LGBTQ+ folks and every one of their neighbors. For example, they might help a local business owner understand how to interact (and train their staff to do so, too) professionally and respectfully when a gender-fluid person walks into their store. This relationship building across sexual orientation and gender identity extends to youth as well, where the planned-for youth center will have designated hours on certain days or

evenings for all of the youth in the community, not just those who identify as LGBTQ+, to hang out together and be supportive of one another.

Mutual support among the Port Townsend community was also on display during the Pride celebration in 2021. Despite the ongoing pandemic safety needs and restrictions changing initial plans, rural ingenuity won out. Pride Line 2021 drew more than 200 people lined up (six feet apart) during a record heat wave to celebrate Pride; it raised more than \$10,000 to go toward the reopening of the Youth Center. Olympic Pride also occupies a regular booth at the Port Townsend Saturday Market, which has offered tremendous educational and community engagement opportunities, as well as the ability for youth to drop by and learn about programming.



Photos from Pride Line and Transgender Day of Remembrance Vigil 2021, courtesy of Ellen Caldwell and <https://olympicpride.org/>



Challenges and Opportunities

As is the case with many nonprofit organizations, staffing and volunteer availability is a challenge for Olympic Pride. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic remains a challenge, particularly for youth, in that the young people in the area seem to be disengaged in virtual activities at this point. Finding safe ways to socialize and connect in-person, since virtual chats have fallen flat, is an ongoing challenge. More broadly, community-level challenges include the pace of knowledge and exposure, and bridging the gap between ideological acceptance vs. practical education. For example, Caldwell mentioned that people may think it is acceptable to be transgender in theory, but do not really feel comfortable speaking to a transgender neighbor.

Still, this is a challenge Caldwell finds hopeful.

"People might come to us and say, 'My grandchild just told me they are nonbinary, and I don't know what that means. Can you tell me more about this?' In and of itself, this willingness to be educated and desire to meet the LGBTQ+ community where they are is an amazing opportunity."

The next step is the education gap, and Olympic Pride looks forward to an increasingly strong future presence, offering support and education.

Conclusion

Feeling seen, included, and valued in one's community are building blocks to social cohesion and overall wellbeing. This case series highlights three examples of rural organizations doing exemplary work to strengthen relationships and support for LGBTQ+ residents, and create a more inclusive environment in their communities. Other rural community leaders can apply their lessons learned in their own efforts to improve social cohesion in their community.

References

1. Henning-Smith C, Gonzales G. Differences by Sexual Orientation in Perceptions of Neighborhood Cohesion: Implications for Health. *J Community Health*. 2018;43(3):578-585. doi:10.1007/s10900-017-0455-z
2. Farmer GW, Blosnich JR, Jabson JM, Matthews DD. Gay Acres: Sexual Orientation Differences in Health Indicators Among Rural and Non-rural Individuals. *J Rural Health Off J Am Rural Health Assoc Natl Rural Health Care Assoc*. 2016;32(3):321-331. doi:10.1111/jrh.12161
3. Movement Advancement Project. *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America*.; 2019. Accessed March 30, 2022. <https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/lgbt-rural-executive-summary.pdf>
4. U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Findlay city, Ohio. Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/findlaycityohio/RHI725219>
5. About Findlay and Hancock County. Visit Findlay. Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://visitfindlay.com/about-contact/about-findlay-and-hancock-county/>
6. Hancock County, Ohio. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/ohio/2020/rankings/hancock/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>
7. Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Hancock. Hancock County Board of Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://www.yourpathtohealth.org/>

8. Findlay Hancock County Community Foundation. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://www.community-foundation.com/>
9. OhioKAN. OhioKAN - Kinship & Adoption Navigator. <https://ohio-kan.jfs.ohio.gov/>. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://ohio-kan.jfs.ohio.gov/>
10. Programs – Spectrum of Findlay. Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://spectrumoffindlaylgbt.org/programs/>
11. About Danville | Danville, VA - Official Website. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.danville-va.gov/1323/About-Danville>
12. U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Danville city, Virginia. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/danvillecityvirginia/PST045221>
13. Danville City County, Virginia. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/virginia/2021/rankings/danville-city/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>
14. RHIhub. Am I Rural? – Report - Danville, VA. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/am-i-rural/report?lat=36.58617&lng=-79.39523&addr=Danville%2C%20VA&exact=0>
15. Collidescope VA. About Us. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.collidescopeva.org>
16. Virginia Values Act – Equality Virginia. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://equalityvirginia.org/what-we-do/make-equality-real/virginia-values-act/>
17. Crane John. Pride flows at Danville's first public LGBTQ event. GoDanRiver.com. Accessed March 31, 2022. https://godanriver.com/news/local/pride-flows-at-danvilles-first-public-lgbtq-event/article_488b368a-7bfb-11e8-94c0-2bb7dc99bbd1.html
18. VRHA – Virginia Rural Health Association. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://vrha.org/>
19. City of Port Townsend Washington. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://cityofpt.us/>
20. U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Port Townsend city, Washington; Danville city, Virginia. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/porttownsendcitywashington/PST045221>
21. Enjoy Port Townsend | Official Tourism Site for Port Townsend, WA - Washington's Victorian Seaport & Arts Community. Accessed

April 5, 2022. <https://enjoypt.com/>

22. Jefferson County, Washington. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/washington/2021/rankings/jefferson/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>

23. Rural Health Information Hub. Healthcare Access in Rural Communities Overview. Accessed March 30, 2022. <https://www.rural-healthinfo.org/topics/healthcare-access>

24. Olympic Pride. Olympic Pride. Accessed April 6, 2022. <https://olympicpride.org>

25. Current Grantees. Pride Foundation. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://pridefoundation.org/community-impact/current-grantees/>

26. Solve – Jefferson Community Foundation. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://jcf-gives.org/solve/>

Suggested Citation

Tuttle M, Libal R, Pick M, and Henning-Smith C. Rural Community Organizations Building Inclusive Environments for LGBTQ+ Residents. *UMN Rural Health Research Center Policy Brief*. June 2022. <https://rhrc.umn.edu/publication/rural-community-organizations-building-inclusive-environments-for-lgbtq-residents/>



Rural Health Research & Policy Centers

Funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy

www.ruralhealthresearch.org

Support for this study was provided by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, Cooperative Agreement U1CRH03717-13-00. The information, conclusions, and opinions expressed are those of the authors, and no endorsement by FORHP, HRSA, or HHS is intended or should be inferred.

For more information, contact Mariana Tuttle (tuttle090@umn.edu)

University of Minnesota Rural Health Research Center
Division of Health Policy and Management, School of Public Health
2221 University Avenue SE, #350 Minneapolis, MN, 55414