Better Practices and Guidelines for PFLAG’s Transgender and Gender-Expansive Support Groups

PFLAG has a long history of full inclusion, dating back to 1998 for everyone in the LGBTQ community. For our members and supporters, supporting family means supporting everyone, and recognizing that different people (and different topics) often require expanding our skill sets.

PFLAG chapters serve the loved ones of people who are transgender or gender-expansive and those who identify as transgender or gender-expansive themselves, providing peer support and important connections to resources. To ensure that chapters have the preparation needed to fulfill this mission, PFLAG National offers this set of good practices and guidelines to support your work.

In this document, you’ll find the following sections:

1. Self-Assessment: What do you have? What do you need?
2. Education: Resources available to help.
3. Sample Chapter Models: What does support look like?
4. Ensure Your Chapter Is Ready: How can everyone be part of the effort?
5. Getting Assistance: How to get support.
6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

It’s always a good idea to be mindful about the kind of peer support that your chapter is providing, so after reading this, check out PFLAG Chapters and Peer Support.
1. Conduct a Chapter Self-Assessment
Before jumping into any project, it’s always smart to make a list of what you’ve got in place, what you still need, and what people are asking for. It will help clarify several points:

- If you are currently supporting transgender and gender-expansive families, this will help you create a resource list of other services and opportunities available in your community.
- This can provide your chapter with a roadmap of opportunities, partnerships and strategies for additional work that you might not be able to do on your own.

Here are a few questions to help with your assessment:

1. What resources do you have to offer already? Include publications, films, brochures, articles, podcasts, electronic links, etc.?
2. Do you have a plan for how best to serve people attending support meetings (e.g., a trained facilitator, ability to break into smaller groups or spaces if needed)?
3. What resources exist in your community? Include organizations working on trans and gender-expansive issues, organizations with programs that address the topic, community centers, events, etc.
4. What needs do you have? In other words, what kinds of requests are you getting for support? Are they from families? Trans or gender-expansive people themselves? From allies who want to learn more? Do you keep a running list of requests for periodic review and reporting to chapter leaders?
5. What kinds of education, resources, or support does your chapter need to carry out this work?
6. Do you have a helpline via email, phone, social media? Do they feel confident in helping or connecting to someone else?

Work with your chapter to answer the questions. Your responses will enable you to develop quick-response tools to help with your support work. While reaching out to your chapter, for example, might be the first step that the parent of a gender-expansive child takes, you could be an integral connection in linking the parent with another community group where they can learn more about their specific experience or locating other support providers that can boost positive experiences for people coming to your meetings, while still keeping your doors open to these families.

Are there things missing in your assessment? Are you perhaps trying to support people with experiences that are less familiar to you? Or maybe this is a newer effort in your chapter, and you’re not sure what you need to know to be supportive. This is where the second step of getting educated comes in.
2. Access and Share Education Resources

As a peer support organization, it’s critical to remember that PFLAG chapters do just that: provide a space to discuss experiences and hear narratives from peers that help identify paths people can take to move forward in their journey towards acceptance. **This is true no matter who is attending and for whom your chapter is providing support.**

One way to be sure that peer support is being properly provided is by ensuring that your support-group facilitators are well trained and clearly understand the role that they need to play.

PFLAG Academy Online provides chapters with two great learning options to use to understand support group structure, and the role of facilitators and how they can artfully navigate tough situations. As a member, you can access them for free on the PFLAG website:

- [Facilitation Skills for PFLAG Leaders: Going from Good to Great](#)
- [Training Toolkit: Facilitation Tools for PFLAG Leaders](#)

There’s also great information on support group structure and rules in the PFLAG Chapter Manual, which is available online [link](pflag.org/chapter-manual).

But being an inclusive leader in your chapter isn’t just about knowing how to run a support-group meeting, but understanding many of the issues that people who identify as transgender or gender-expansive face -- and how, in many cases, these experiences are different from what people experience as LGB or Q. You don’t have to be an expert in order to provide support, but you should learn more about all of the constituencies your chapter is serving.

PFLAG National offers two great publications that can help you become more familiar with the issues and what you can do:

- **Our Trans Loved Ones**: This publication is designed for families and loved ones of people who are trans and gender-expansive, and aims to provide basic education and personal stories that help get people on their journey to support.
- **Guide to being a trans ally**: This publication (part of PFLAG’s Straight for Equality project) is designed to help people who are looking to become allies to the trans community understand what their role is and specific ways to demonstrate support.

Remember your self-assessment? This is a great time to put some of the information you gathered into action as a great educational tool. Create an additional resource sheet for people seeking support, that includes the local and national resources that may also help them:

- **Local Organizations**: Provide a list of LGBTQ community centers, other organizations and social service centers/providers, etc. to help people access other kinds of support that they may need.

- **Other publications and resources**: Are there publications that helped people in your chapter? Was it a book? A website? A podcast? Create a best-of list, and make it available for people looking for even more support.
• **Events:** Does your chapter do or participate in an annual International Transgender Day of Remembrance event? Is there a local annual Transgender Day of Visibility and/or Trans Pride event? Is there a local bookstore that features trans or gender-expansive authors or book reading events? Are there conferences in your area that support trans and gender-expansive people? Is there a program offered through a community center? Be sure to list them out to help people build a supportive community around themselves.
3. Chapter Support Models

Finding ways to effectively provide support to families and loved ones of people who are transgender and gender-expansive doesn’t have to be a one-size-fits-all solution. Based on your needs, chapter culture, and capacity, the way that you structure your support work will be unique. But no matter what, there are some core similarities to the work.

No matter your structure, you must:

- **Honor the fact that PFLAG does not provide professional support or therapy.** PFLAG only provides peer support, where people have an opportunity to share their story, and a chance to listen to the stories of others who may have experienced something similar. It is not the role of chapter leadership or participants to prescribe actions.

- **Create a supportive space** in which everyone can be heard and is treated with respect and dignity, especially when disagreement occurs.

- **Be able to provide additional resources for support group participants.** You don’t need to know the answers to everything, but you do need to know how to help people find what they need.

- **Follow guidelines for working with youth.** There are a number of special considerations for chapters that work with youth under 18 years of age. Before you consider embarking on youth-focused support services, read PFLAG’s Guidelines for Working with Youth for information on how to address these issues.

- **There should be no “diagnosing” of conditions or issues** (e.g., “It sounds like you’re child is trans, not a lesbian.”). This is the case even if a person who is a professional counselor (e.g., therapist, psychologist) is leading the group.

- **No one should suggest or advocate for healthcare treatments** (e.g., “What you need to do is get a prescription for hormone blockers for your son.”)

- **Participants should not be prescriptive in their feedback** (e.g., “If you want to be supportive to your child, here are the things that you must do...”).

Here are a few examples of how some chapters provide support, along with a brief overview of the benefits and challenges:

**Create an All-in-One Support Model**

In this model, there is one main support circle (which may be broken into smaller groups if the size is unwieldy). Parents, family members, and allies of LGBTQs as well as LGBTQ people themselves are all together and groups are not broken out by interest. It relies on at least one facilitator or board member...
being well-versed in providing support to trans and gender-expansive participants should they appear at the meeting.

Benefits:
- Participants get the opportunity to learn about all families’ experiences.
- Can send a welcoming message to transgender and gender-expansive people and their families that they’re included in the PFLAG family.

Challenges:
- Must ensure facilitators are all trained in the topic.
- A large group may not provide the space/time for someone with a very specific question or challenge to be heard.
- For those concerned about confidentiality, this may be uncomfortable.

Create a Separate Meeting Group or Full Breakout
For some chapters, the need for specific spaces for people looking for support has led them to step outside the traditional idea of a big support circle to develop more dedicated spaces.

This can appear in a few different ways:
- Breakout support circles during a monthly meeting for people who are looking to discuss transgender issues
- Breakout support circles that are even more specific, for example, a group for people who are coming out as transgender and/or a group for parents of gender-expansive kids
- Holding support group meetings for those looking to focus on trans and gender-expansive issues on a different night than the main monthly meeting.

Benefits:
- Creates a dedicated space where people can discuss similar experiences.
- Opportunity for leadership among members who can spearhead the effort.

Challenges:
- Additional meetings require more volunteer capacity.
- Stand-alone meetings or groups may not have enough consistent participants to be effective.
- Separating out groups may inadvertently send message that there’s a fundamental difference in support provided to LGB and T constituents.
- Separate groups may not feel a connection to each other or to the chapter as a whole.

Develop a Chapter “Trans Expert”:
In this model, one or two people are designated as “experts” in the issue of transgender and gender-expansive support and issues. People in these roles are the go-to for people in need of support, often working one on one, and playing the role of “buddy” for new members.
Benefits:
- Allows for people to become skilled resources for the chapter.
- Support can be provided one-on-one.
- Ensures that there is always a go-to person in the chapter with issue expertise.

Challenges:
- Expertise is not widespread through chapter, but limited to one person.
- This can easily turn into advice and not support.
- One-on-one support doesn’t allow for a diversity of viewpoints to be heard and doesn’t allow for person to connect with other chapter members.
- May make people feel that transgender and gender-expansive topics are being marginalized and not addressed as part of the whole group.

Still have more questions about how to make your chapter supportive of people who are trans and gender-expansive and their families? Check out the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) at the end of this guide.
4. Ensure Your Chapter is Visible!

While getting your support group in shape to support families of people who are transgender and gender-expansive is important, working to be sure that people know your chapter is accessible and inclusive is an ongoing effort. Here are just a few things to think about and discuss with your members:

- **Do people know you’re supportive?** Be sure that your materials -- everything from your website to brochures to social media efforts -- indicate that you’re supporting people who are transgender and gender-expansive.

- **Mind your language.** A lot of terms have changed in the trans-inclusive conversation. Make sure that you’re using the most inclusive words possible. Do your materials say “transgender” instead of “transgendered”? Do you talk about people who are “gender-expansive” instead of those who are “gender-nonconforming”? Have questions? Talk to your Field Manager or your Regional Director for help.

- **Are you community-connected and listening?** Everyone has a story to tell, and one of the most incredible trademarks of a trans ally is listening to those stories. Be sure to hear the narratives of people from your community with an open mind and heart.

- **What are you sharing with people?** Sharing information and news on your website and social media feeds? Do you regularly include stories about people who are transgender and gender-expansive?

- **Don’t forget your advocacy work.** Once you demonstrate support, it puts you in the position to advocate for change. Be sure to stay connected to local issues that may affect the trans and gender-expansive community where you live.

- **Keep engaging your chapter.** Remember that when it comes to family, PFLAG doesn’t leave anyone behind or out. Make becoming trans-inclusive and literate an ongoing project for your whole chapter. Understanding the issues faced by transgender and gender-expansive people and their families appear in countless ways, so be sure to engage people to help provide educational opportunities for the whole chapter to become support ambassadors, especially when they’re outside of chapter meetings.
5. Get additional support.

The ways we can provide support and the things we need to know to do it effectively are constantly changing. Add to that the reality that each person’s experience and needs are unique, and your efforts can sometimes seem challenging.

But here’s the good news: PFLAG is here to support you.

If you find that you’re not sure how to handle a situation or want to get some perspective on an issue, PFLAG National Staff and your Regional Director are available to assist. You can find their information by visiting pflag.org/staff to get started.

And don’t forget that there are great tools online to provide you with information 24/7 at both pflag.org/transgender and straightforequality.org/trans.
6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. **Our chapter has a large, active transgender family support group, but there’s a lack of connection between that group and the rest of the chapter. The facilitator won’t share membership information with the board so participants are not on the PFLAG mailing list which means they don’t know about other chapter activities. How do we get this support group more connected to the chapter?**

   First, it is important that everyone is aware that breakout support groups are *always* part of the PFLAG chapter. Because of this, you want their activities and work to be connected. This isn’t about appearances. It’s about ensuring that everyone participating in a chapter’s support services has access and information about all of the activities happening. So in this case, it is the facilitator’s responsibility to provide relevant contact information to chapter leadership to ensure that all participants are getting the same important information and always feel connected to the chapter.

   Second, think about ways that you might be able to bring these groups together to share, learn, and connect. Are the meetings on the same night in the same place? Schedule timelines so everyone can have social or program time together. If they’re not, try hosting an all-member event and be sure that all participants are getting invited. PFLAG’s mission is about support, education, and advocacy and it’s the responsibility of chapter leadership to make that accessible to everyone.

2. **We offer a support group for transgender adults. Some chapter members have requested to sit in on this support group so that they can learn more about the community. But members of the group want it to be just for people who are transgender. Can the support group be closed or should it be open to anyone who wants to attend?**

   There are two ways to handle this situation.

   First, remember the purpose of support meetings -- *it is to provide peer support to people*. Finding ways to make these groups as effective and inclusive as possible is a priority. If the leader of the adult transgender group feels that the support services may be compromised by “observers” then their perspective should be considered very seriously in deciding how to manage attendance.

   Second, keep in mind that PFLAG’s mission isn’t just about support -- it’s also about education. It is fantastic that there are members who are looking to learn more about people who are transgender so that they can better support them! Use this as an opportunity to offer educational programs as part of your meetings. Consider hosting a panel of transgender and gender-expansive speakers to talk about their experiences. Watch one of the PFLAG Academy Online learning sessions about trans inclusion and then host a discussion. Invite speakers in from the community to talk about their stories and work. Take advantage of people’s’ desire to learn, and find the right place to do it.
3. Our chapter has had very few people who are transgender and gender-expansive (or their families) coming to our meetings. Because we haven’t had much experience, most of our members don’t know much about this topic. So when people do come for support, we usually refer them to other organizations or places in the community. Is this the right course of action?

While making referrals to other organizations is often a great idea since some can provide services that a chapter may not, keep in mind that PFLAG’s mission is fully inclusive of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender-expansive, queer, and questioning. This means that it is our responsibility to do our best to support everyone in the community, including topics less familiar to you.

So how can you do this? First, start learning about what some of the issues are facing people who are transgender or gender-expansive and their families. A great place to begin is by reading PFLAG’s *Our Trans Loved Ones* and the Straight for Equality *guide to being a trans ally*. Second, check out some of the PFLAG Academy Online learning sessions about being supportive of people who are trans and gender-expansive. Finally, make a connection with the organizations that you’ve been referring people to -- is there someone there who might be willing to offer some education on how to address the issues that people who are transgender people and their families face? Might they be willing to attend support meetings? Connect with your community partners to help expand your understanding and ability to support everyone who walks through the door.