Issues Affecting LGBT Health

Individuals who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) represent many races, ethnicities, religions, geographic locations, and social classes. However, since sexual orientation and gender identity questions are not asked on most national or state surveys, it is difficult to estimate the number of individuals who are LGBT across the U.S. and understand their unique health needs. In order to provide quality care to LGBT individuals, there are specific health issues that must be examined and addressed.

Why LGBT Health Is Important

Eliminating LGBT health disparities and enhancing efforts to improve LGBT health are necessary to ensure that individuals who are LGBT can lead long, healthy lives. LGBT health requires specific attention from health care and public health professionals to address a number of disparities, including:

- LGBT youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide
- Lesbians are less likely to get preventive services for cancer
- Gay men are at higher risk of HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), especially among communities of color
- Lesbians and bisexual females are more likely to be overweight or obese
- Transgender individuals have a high prevalence of HIV/STDs, victimization, mental health issues and suicide, and are less likely to have health insurance than heterosexual or LGBT individuals
- Transgender individuals, especially transgender women, are far more likely to be victims of LGBT or HIV-motivated homicides
- Transgender people are more likely to experience physical violence from the police, discrimination, sexual violence, and bias-based violence in shelters
- LGBT populations have the highest rates of tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use
- Discrimination in employment and relationship recognition
- Lack of financial and community resources targeting the health concerns of LGBT communities and their families
- Avoidance of care due to a legitimate fear of discrimination and prejudice
- Lack of cultural competence by health care providers, health educators and health policy makers in regard to the specific needs of the LGBT community
- Legal discrimination in access to health insurance, employment, housing, marriage, adoption, and retirement benefits

Addressing LGBT Health Disparities

There are many benefits to addressing health concerns and reducing disparities for all individuals, and it is no different for individuals who are LGBT. Some of the benefits of addressing LGBT health concerns include reductions in disease transmission and progression, increased mental and physical well-being, reduced health care costs, and increased longevity.

The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion recognizes the need to understand LGBT health issues, including specific LGBT objectives, in its Healthy People 2020 agenda, which is a federal initiative. Due to increased health
disparities and barriers LGBT individuals face, there continue to be efforts to address these health disparities. Such efforts include:

- Expansion of domestic partner health insurance coverage
- Establishment of LGBT health centers
- Dissemination of effective HIV/STD interventions
- Providing supportive social services to reduce suicide and homelessness risk among youth
- Appropriately inquiring about and being supportive of a patient’s sexual orientation to enhance the patient-provider interaction and regular use of care
- Providing medical students with access to LGBT patients to increase provision of culturally competent care

There are still a number of issues that need to be evaluated and addressed in the years to come. The federal government has included LGBT objectives specific to data collection in hopes of identifying such issues. Some of the continuing issues in LGBT health are:

- Prevention of violence and homicide toward the LGBT community, especially the transgender population
- Nationally representative data on LGBT Americans
- Resiliency in LGBT communities
- LGBT parenting
- Elder health and well-being
- Exploration of sexual/gender identity among youth
- Need for an LGBT wellness model
- Recognition of transgender health needs as medically necessary

**LGBT Individuals and the Affordable Care Act**

The Affordable Care Act presents an unprecedented opportunity to address disparities and improve the well-being and economic security of LGBT individuals and communities by promoting access to affordable, comprehensive health insurance coverage. A variety of Affordable Care Act (ACA) measures are improving the health and well-being of the LGBT community:

- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is expanding their data on health disparities, including those associated with sexual orientation and gender identity.
- A non-discrimination policy applies in the marketplaces, which bans discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Insurers may no longer place annual or lifetime limits on benefits. In the past, some people with HIV or other chronic illnesses ran out of coverage because their health care expenses reached a dollar limit imposed by their insurer.
- Mental health and substance use recovery services are now included among essential benefits that all qualified insurance plans must offer.
- Public and private insurance plans are required to cover a variety of preventive care services, many of which provide free benefits for LGBT individuals.
- Over $100 million has been made available through Community Transformation Grants to support community-based strategies to eliminate health disparities.
• Expansion of a diverse and culturally competent workforce, enabling health providers to better serve members of the LGBT community.
• $11 billion has been allocated to support the expansion and creation of Community Health Centers. These centers provide health care services to underserved populations, such as the LGBT community.
• The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), with the Office of Minority Health, began developing a long-term policy agenda for addressing health disparities among LGBT individuals who are also racial minorities.

As a result of the Affordable Care Act, millions of LGBT people and their families will experience improvements in the quality and accessibility of coverage and care. More research is needed to document, understand, and address the factors that contribute to health disparities in the LGBT community. Increased understanding and working to address unique disparities, barriers, and health needs will help ensure that LGBT individuals have access to the coverage and care they need and deserve.