



Responsive Services for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) Newcomers

Guidance for service providers based on research and practice

This guide helps service providers understand the distinctive challenges facing newcomers who are transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) and can help agencies that are engaging in training initiatives to ensure that all of their clients have access to appropriate services. It is based on a review of available resources, as well as the experience of [Episcopal Migration Ministries' Rainbow Initiative](#) and its partners, including Clark University's [Integration and Belonging Hub](#), [InReach](#), the [LGBT Asylum Task Force](#) of Hadwen Park Congregational Church, and [Oasis Legal Services](#). A compendium of resources is provided at the end of the guide.

The distinctive needs of TGNC newcomers

TGNC newcomers may present many of the same needs and strengths as those who are cisgender. But service providers can also face additional challenges related to identification and labeling; intake; confidentiality; communicating across cultures, languages, and generations; legal needs; transition-related (or gender-affirming) care; social isolation; mental health; and referrals and partnerships.



Transgender describes people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

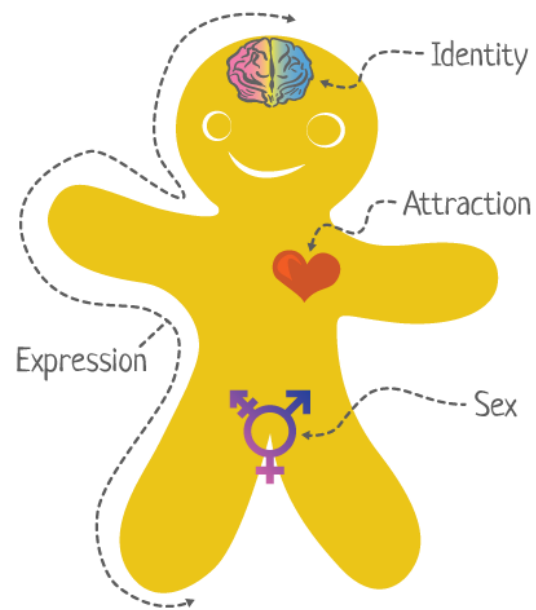
Gender nonconforming describes people whose gender expression differs from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity.

[GLAAD Glossary of Terms \(2022\)](#)

The Genderbread Person

This graphic helps visualize how sexual orientation, biological sex, gender identity, and gender experience can vary independently. Each element exists on a spectrum of many options—e.g., one can identify as a man, woman, non-binary, gender-queer, non-conforming, or many other options.

[Sam Killerman \(2016\)](#)



Key concepts

Gender identity: a person's internal, deeply held knowledge of their own gender. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender expression: external manifestations of gender expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, voice, and/or behavior. Societies classify these external cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Biological sex: a medical term referring to a person's anatomical, hormonal, and genetic traits.

Gender (or sex) marker: words and other marks used to indicate gender on documents such as driver's licenses, passports, bank accounts, etc.

Sexual orientation: an inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

Other vocabulary

The English-language terminology used to talk about gender differences is complex and dynamic. This list is informed by the [glossary presented by GLAAD](#), which provides more detailed information.

Cisgender: an adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Nonbinary: an adjective used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of "man" and "woman."

Gender dysphoria: unease or discomfort caused by a mismatch between someone's internal sense of gender and the gender or sex they were assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria is not a mental illness, but it is an official mental health diagnosis that can validate the need for gender-affirming medical care.

Transition: the process a person undertakes to bring their gender expression and/or their body into alignment with their gender identity. It is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time and the exact steps involved in transition will vary from person to person.

Pronoun use, naming, and intake

TGNC newcomers may have any immigration status. While some flee their homelands because of persecution based on their gender identity, others flee because of persecution based on other characteristics, or because of warfare, natural disasters, or extreme poverty. Very often, complex combinations of forces lead them to seek safety in the U.S., and their gender identity is typically not specified on their documentation. Given these complex immigration pathways, service providers may be unaware that they are already serving TGNC clients.

Agencies should ask newcomers their pronouns when performing intake, avoiding assumptions about their gender identities based on clothing, name, appearance, or identity documents.

During the intake process, ensure you:

- Offer opportunities for clients to include their gender identity, with options beyond the male/female binary, including a write-in option. You can ask clients to choose or write in a salutation such as Mr., Ms., or Mx. (indicating nonbinary identification).
- Model your acceptance of TGNC identity by sharing your own pronouns
- Include questions about the names clients would like to use when being addressed
- In the case where a **dead name** (a formerly used name) or incorrect pronouns must be used for documentation or service access, communicate to the client when and why this happens

Due to safety, privacy, or cultural concerns, some newcomers may not feel comfortable sharing their gender identity or sexual orientation on intake forms, but they may share this information after they develop trusting relationships with their service providers.

Confidentiality

“Coming out”—that is, identifying one's gender identity or sexual orientation—can be empowering when it is freely chosen, but dangerous and traumatic when it is coerced or disclosed without permission. It is often a gradual process that first centers on self-awareness and then progresses to sharing personal information with those who are most trusted, or on an as-needed basis. Often, TGNC newcomers will not want to disclose their status to the general public or members of their ethnic group due to fears of discrimination or violence.

In some cases, they may prefer to use certain names and pronouns in private, and others in public.

Confidentiality and informed consent are of paramount importance. **When a TGNC newcomer comes out to you, clarify with them who should have access to that information.** If and when you must share that information—for example, with colleagues—discuss those requirements with them, and ensure that your colleagues are aware of the client's confidentiality concerns.

Communicating across cultures and generations

Communicating about gender identity and expression across languages and cultures is complex. Even native English speakers use a wide variety of vocabulary, and people from different generations may be comfortable with different terminology. Not only are the words we use different, but our underlying understandings of gender identity vary widely in the current day, just as they have across history.

To speak respectfully with TGNC clients:

- Always seek to address clients in ways that reflect their self-determination
- If you make a mistake, apologize, try to correct any damage you might have done, learn from the experience, and move on
- Include attention to key concepts and vocabulary (see info box on pg. 2) in staff and volunteer training programs.
- Staff and [interpreters](#) communicating in languages other than English should use appropriate terminology to the best of their ability. Many multilingual glossaries are available, some listed at the end of this resource.

Legal needs

TGNC newcomers face a wide variety of legal challenges related to discrimination, violence, identity documents, and immigration.

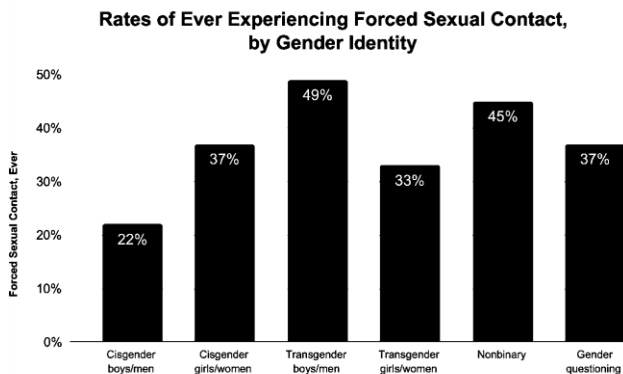
For in-depth guidance on the legal needs of TGNC newcomers, see: [Safeguarding Identity and Addressing the Legal Needs of LGBTQ+ Newcomers \(2024\)](#)

Identity and immigration documentation

It is a priority for many TGNC newcomers to update their names and gender markers on identity documents to alleviate gender dysphoria. To learn more about how to address these needs, see the above legal blog and other sources in this guide.

Discrimination and violence

TGNC newcomers are at increased risk for discrimination and violence in their everyday lives, in any detention facilities, and unfortunately even in their social service agencies and ethnic communities. TGNC people are often more visible as gender minorities and have experienced higher levels of trauma or abuse than other LGBTQ+ people, which can put them at risk of more direct physical danger.¹



Among young people, the rate of forced sexual contact is highest for TGNC youth.

Ensure that clients feel comfortable discussing instances of violence and discrimination with you. To see what legal protections apply to your area, conduct an internet search or consult an LGBTQ+ community organization in your state. In some cases, your help may be limited to problem-solving conversations, while others may call for mediation or the involvement of law enforcement.

To minimize the chances that TGNC clients experience discrimination within your agency:

- Train staff, volunteers, and partners (see Resources on pg. 6)

- Ensure they are accountable for providing respectful and welcoming services to all
- Create a culture of welcome—for example, by hanging [posters that proclaim “You Are Safe Here” in multiple languages](#), and through conversations with clients about living in a multicultural society

Transition and gender-affirming care

Transition-related (or gender-affirming) care is deeply personal and varies widely among TGNC people. It can include:

- **Social transitions**, such as changing gender expression through clothing and hairstyle or adopting a new name or pronouns
- **Supportive case management practices and gender-affirming mental health services**
- **Medical care**, like hormone therapy and surgery

These needs can evolve over time and may require the help of doctors or other specialized service providers. It is always the client’s choice which avenues of transition they want to explore.

Social isolation and mental health

Social isolation is a major risk factor for mental illness among TGNC people.² This is especially true for newcomers, many of whom arrive in the U.S. after having suffered traumatic experiences and who continue to experience violence and discrimination. Without support from their friends, their families, or their ethnic communities, they are at increased risk of trauma-related illnesses, depression, anxiety, and suicide. Consequently, their abilities to integrate with their new communities are diminished.

You can help TGNC newcomers feel a sense of belonging and share mutual support with others by:

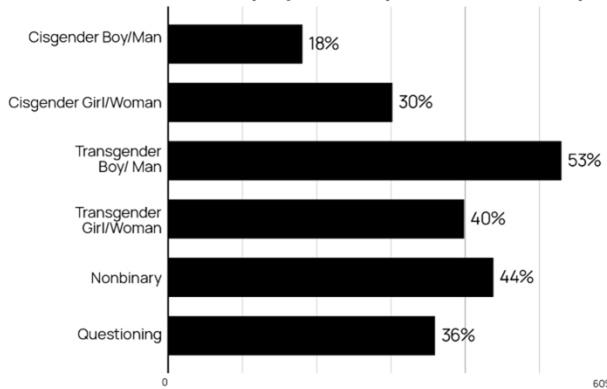
- Demonstrating your own acceptance
- Organizing social gatherings
- [Introducing them to community organizations](#) and [support groups](#)

Not all community organizations (see the [CenterLink](#) directory) will offer services that are culturally or linguistically competent, or will understand migration; you can help them increase those capacities.

¹ Trevor Project, [Sexual Violence and Suicide Risk Among Young People](#), 2024.

² Trevor Project, [Trauma and Suicide Risk Among LGBTQ+ Youth](#), 2022.

Percentage of LGBTQ Youth Who Reported High Levels of Trauma Symptoms By Gender Identity



Among LGBTQ youth, TGNC youth reported the highest levels of trauma.

Some individuals may also need [professional mental health treatment](#) provided by clinicians who have specialized skills. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health provides a [directory](#) that may be helpful.

Since many of your TGNC clients will have experienced trauma, they will benefit from the implementation of [practical strategies](#) for welcoming TGNC newcomers in your service provision, as well as from [trauma-informed approaches](#) marked by confidentiality, allyship, safe spaces, continued attention to addressing discrimination, and strong partnerships.

Medical transition and health care

Various medical options are available to TGNC people, which do not necessarily need to be completed in a specific order, or at all, for an individual to transition. While medical transition can be difficult for any TGNC person to pursue, TGNC newcomers often encounter additional hurdles, such as:

- Navigating complex health care systems
- Overcoming language barriers
- Needing to provide documentation to which they may not have access

Your role as a service provider is not to be an expert on all of these medical options, but rather to guide clients in exploring what is right for them, find referrals to appropriate medical providers, and advocate for them with insurance coverage and other community supports.

Non-surgical options include:

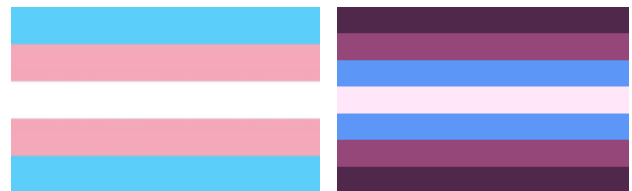
- Hormones/hormonal therapy, primarily testosterone and estrogen
- Puberty blockers: only used for trans youth; reversible; delays puberty and development of secondary sex characteristics
- Voice therapy: teaches speaking/communication skills to align with desired gender expression (more common for transfeminine people)
- Laser hair removal (face and/or body)

Surgical options include:

- Facial surgery: plastic surgery to reshape bones and tissues to enhance or create more feminine or masculine features
- Top surgery: upper body surgery for gender alignment, such as breast tissue removal, adjustment, or augmentation
- Bottom surgery: lower body surgery for gender alignment, such as modifying, implanting, or removing genitalia

More information on gender-affirming health care is available from the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#). Confirmation of readiness for gender-affirming surgery follows [World Professional Association for Transgender Health \(WPATH\)](#) standards for clinical screenings and prerequisites, which ensure ethical patient care *and* insurance coverage. Criteria include:

- Informed consent
- Gender incongruence history
- Mental health evaluation with support letter
- Potential medical prerequisites such as hormone therapy
- Clinical screening for readiness for surgery (physical exam, blood tests, etc.)



Transgender and Gender Nonconforming flags

Conclusion: Referrals and Partnerships

No one agency can provide all the services and expertise that are needed by TGNC newcomers. Resettlement agencies, specialized health care providers, TGNC and LGBTQ+ community organizations, legal service providers, and others all have their role to play. One challenge that service providers are likely to face is that partner and referral organizations will have strong knowledge about some fields important to TGNC newcomers, but not others. When that is the case, opportunities for mutual learning become especially important. See the Resources section for links to training materials and directories that could be useful.

Resources

Available in the Switchboard Library

Written Resources

- [How to Support Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Newcomers \(2024\)](#)
- [Healthy Life, Healthy Body, Healthy Mind: Social Determinants of Health and LGBTQ+ Newcomers \(2024\)](#)
- [Welcoming LGBTQ+ Newcomers: Practical Tools and Tips \(2024\)](#)
- [Safeguarding Identity and Addressing the Legal Needs of LGBTQ+ Newcomers \(2024\)](#)
- [Proud to Welcome All: Community Education about LGBTQ+ Newcomers at Pride and World Refugee Day Events \(2024\)](#)
- [Navigating the Incidence of Hate Incidents and Hate Crimes on Clients and Direct Service Staff \(2024\)](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers \(2023\)](#)
- [What works to support LGBTQ+ Refugees? \(2022\)](#)
- [Access to Mental Health Services for Refugees and Other Vulnerable Immigrants in the U.S. \(2019\)](#)

Archived Webinars

- [Understanding and Serving LGBTQ+ Refugee and Newcomer Clients \(2024\)](#)
- [Creating Inclusive Spaces for the LGBTQ+ Community in Newcomer Services \(2024\)](#)
- [LGBTQ+ Responsive URM Programs and Services \(2024\)](#)

Other Resources

Glossaries

- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#), 11th Edition
- [Human Rights Campaign](#) transgender and nonbinary people FAQ
- [National Immigrant Justice Center](#) Arabic LGBTQ terminology
- [Center of Excellence on LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity](#) Spanish glossary

Directories

- [CenterLink](#) directory of LGBTQ+ community centers
- [InReach](#) directory of organizations that welcome LGBTQ+ people
- [Trans Lifeline](#) directory of support groups
- [World Professional Association for Transgender Health](#) directory of service providers

Additional Resources

- [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) information about gender-affirming care
- [Episcopal Migration Ministries' Rainbow Initiative](#)
- [Genderbread Person](#) by Sam Killerman
- [Interpretips: Webinar Series, Interpreting for Gender & Sexual Diversity](#)
- [LGBT Asylum Task Force, Hadwen Park Congregational Church UCC](#)
- [National Immigrant Justice Center](#)
- [National LGBTQ Bar Association and Foundation](#)
- [Oasis Legal Services](#)
- [ORAM multilingual posters—"You are Safe Here"](#)
- [World Professional Association for Transgender Health \(WPATH\)](#) standards for clinical screenings and prerequisites
- [Trevor Project](#) research briefs

To learn more about
Switchboard, visit
www.SwitchboardTA.org.



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