

LGBT youths in Washington area get their first mentoring program



Brian Taylor/For The Washington Post - From left: Spencer Olson, community engagement coordinator for Metro TeenAIDS; Brooke Taylor, former DC Center intern; David Mariner, executive director, DC Center; Stephanie Stines, project director of Connect to Protect

By [Megan Buerger](#), *The Washington Post*

It's been a benchmark year for gay rights. From the repeal of the military's [Don't Ask, Don't Tell](#) policy in September to President Obama's [pivotal endorsement](#) of same-sex marriage last month, the movement has gained considerable speed. And as policies and polls reveal an opinion shift by Americans in favor of gay marriage, the rainbow flag has become a ubiquitous symbol of the fight for equal rights.

But mention this progress to a group of gay and transgender teens and young adults in the Washington area and be met with shrugs, sighs, silence. For them, the progress in the government and mainstream media seems surface-level. Their world — where bullying, discrimination, HIV and homelessness live on — can still feel as dangerous, lonely and misunderstood as it did a decade ago.

“It's like, okay, we can marry, so what's next?” said K.D. Monroe, 21, who lives and works in the District. “Do we need a gay president to make a point? To get society to let us be who we want to be? Those things don't make it any easier for me to walk down the street, to be who I am.”

Recognizing these concerns, four gay rights advocates developed a mentoring program in hopes that it would foster a sense of belonging. The program, called [Leading Youth Forward Everyday](#), will pair LGBT adults with young people ages 16 to 24 and include cultural enrichment programs, field trips and educational activities. When it starts its three-month pilot program in August, LYFE Mentors will be the first LGBT-specific mentoring program in the region.

The program's founders, who work at other LGBT and HIV/AIDS awareness organizations in the Washington area — including [Metro TeenAIDS](#), [Connect to Protect](#) and [the DC Center](#) — are familiar with the challenges that gay teens face. They say mentors can potentially offset such risks in the community as homelessness and attempted suicide.

Other organizations are also ramping up their support for LGBT youths. Last June, the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency created the [Connecting Rainbows Initiative](#), a program within their LGBT task force that trains social workers on ways to support gay teens in the foster-care system. CASA for Children of D.C., an organization that advocates for children in foster care, has started offering [similar training](#) for its mentors. And the DC Center, the region's umbrella organization for the LGBT community and the official sponsor of LYFE Mentors, has formed a youth support group to make the center responsive to certain needs.

“Gay youths are a very vulnerable group,” said David Mariner, executive director of the DC Center. Last week, the center released data from the 2010 [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), a biennial survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reporting that LGBT youth in D.C. public schools are at significantly higher risk for bullying, drug use, sexual assault and suicide than their heterosexual peers.

“For them, it's not really about passing a bill. It's about feeling lonely.”

The new focus on young people is timely, said Andrew Barnett, executive director of the [Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League](#). He said that partly because of the gay community's increased presence in the media, young people are coming out earlier in life. But sometimes, this creates false hope for security and acceptance.