An Assessment of Cohesion Among Professionals

Who Serve LGBTQ+ Youth in Kansas City

Seth A. Middleton

Department of Social Work, University of Missouri-Kansas City

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Prof. Amy Simmons

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Amid historically high numbers of anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) legislation at the state and federal level in the United States, Kansas City is in a critical moment of growth. Several pillars of LGBTQ+ youth services have shuttered in recent years, while others have been formed. Without a unifying body, professionals who serve LGBTQ+ have no way to effectively communicate and collaborate, leaving them vulnerable to interpersonal conflict, duplication of services, and ineffective communication with stakeholders. Given the critical need for comprehensive services for LGBTQ+ youth in Kansas City, the instability of unity among service providers, and the general decline in availability of LGBTQ+ nonprofit services nationwide (Movement Advancement Project [MAP] & CenterLink, 2020), the need to formally assess LGBTQ+ service providers' needs and capacity is apparent.

This project used the Tri-Ethnic Center's Community Readiness Model to assess the community's perception of cohesion among youth-serving professionals and to find how ready the community is to improve cohesion. It was hypothesized that the community was ready for and could benefit from a coalition for professionals who work with LGBTQ+ youth.

Purpose & Intervention

LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk of experiencing social isolation, bullying, mental health issues, and homelessness (Rhoades et. al, 2018; Russell & Fish, 2016). However, LGBTQ+ youth who have access to supportive services (i.e. community spaces, school gay-straight alliances, affirming healthcare providers) are less likely to experience negative outcomes such as substance use, depression, poor self-esteem, and suicidality (Fish et al., 2019; Fish, 2020; Russell and Fish, 2016).

Many professionals, including social workers, counselors, educators, and healthcare providers, are committed to supporting LGBTQ+ youth and promoting their well-being. However, effective service delivery requires more than individual efforts; it also depends on the cohesion and collaboration among professionals. Community cohesion refers to the degree to which professionals share a common vision, values, and goals, and work together to achieve them.

Kansas City has experienced a decline in LGBTQ+ services in recent years (Holwick, 2022; Transformations, 2020), but new services have continued to develop as well (A. Allee, personal communication, 2022; Kansas City Center for Inclusion [@inclusive_kc], 2022). Kansas City has no uniting organizational body for LGBTQ+ services, so providers rely on personal relationships and networking for collaboration, which leaves agencies vulnerable to tumult when those relationships encounter conflict.

The last three years have been challenging for Kansas City's LGBTQ+ community organizations. Funding deficits, leadership changes, volunteer shortages, state- and national-level policy reversals, and growing openness of anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies (MAP, 2022) have all contributed to gaps in services and overworked providers. But the spirit of LGBTQ+ activism and celebration is alive in Kansas City and refuses to give up the fight, evidenced by the innovation and resource-building agencies have shown. This time poses a unique opportunity for organizers: the chance to unite and choose sustainability and cohesion over division and burnout. Potential uniting bodies exist in Kansas City (e.g. the Kansas City Center for Inclusion, the Kansas City Pride Alliance) but steps must be taken before a plan is created to ensure that the community is ready to make the change.

Social workers are obligated by the National Association of Social Worker (NASW) Code of Ethics to "challenge social injustice," "respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person," "engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully," and "promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity" (NASW, 2021). Addressing the problem of community division among LGBTQ+ service agencies and lack of service availability to LGBTQ+ youth fulfills these ethical duties.

Tri-Ethnic Center Community Readiness Model

The Community Readiness Model (CRM) was first developed by the Tri-Ethnic Center (TEC) for Prevention Research at Colorado State University. In Plested, Edwards, & Jumper-Thurman (2006) and Kostadinov, et al. (2015), the validity and reliability of the CRM assessment tool are established. The CRM has been used with dozens of populations to assess community needs, community awareness of an issue, policy development, and community stage of change (TEC, 2014; Kostadinov et al., 2015). The CRM is based on Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross's Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (1992), comparing communities to individuals "in the sense that they move through stages before they are ready to implement programs, develop and deliver interventions, and take other actions to address an issue" (TEC, 2014). The CRM expands Prochaska and DiClemente's five individual stages to nine stages of community readiness (see illustration), then

Stages of Community Readiness

9 Ownership
8 Confirmation
7 Stabilization
6 Initiation
5 Preparation
4 Pre-Planning
3 Vague Awareness
2 Denial / Resistance
1 No Awareness

elaborates further by using five dimensions of readiness: Community knowledge of the issue, community knowledge of efforts, community climate about the issue, leadership knowledge and action, and resources in the community (TEC, 2014). Using the Community Readiness Assessment (CRA) tool, one identifies how prepared the community is to make changes to address an issue, and then one can match an intervention to that stage of change. By using the matching style of intervention, changemakers can focus on gradual improvements, thereby creating lasting change (Plested, Edwards, & Jumper-Thurman, 2006).

In this project, the CRA was used to answer the question, "How ready are professionals who serve LGBTQ+ youth to address the issue of lack of community cohesion?" Integrating the lens of community cohesion, the project will focus on existing feelings of and readiness to improve community connectedness, inviting stakeholders from different sectors to share their knowledge and insight. By using the CRA, as opposed to introducing a ready-made action plan, the proposal reflects understanding of the community's history, trauma, stressors, and need for sustainable change.

Implementation

Implementation of the project began with an extensive outreach effort to recruit participants. Recruitment was conducted primarily through emails or Facebook messages to all active or recently-inactivated organizations who work with or for LGBTQ+ youth and families, with follow-up messages sent two weeks later if no response was received. About 16 organizations were contacted, of which five responded. A recruitment graphic was created with a short summary of the project, participant parameters, and a link and QR code to the informational page. The graphic was posted on several Facebook groups, including "LGBTQ+ in

KC," "Northland PRIDE Network," "KC Helping Professionals," and "LGBT Parents and Allies."

The linked informational page was a Qualtrics survey with a more detailed description of the assessment and an option to provide contact information for follow up. Respondents indicated whether they were interested in being interviewed or if they only wanted to receive a summary of findings. There were 26 total responses, with 12 people indicating they wanted to schedule an interview. A scheduling link was sent to those 12 responses, along with 5 people who contacted the author directly. Twelve interviews were scheduled and ultimately ten interviews were conducted. Interviews took place one-on-one and lasted 45 minutes to two hours.

Each interview was conducted over Zoom and recorded. Zoom generated a transcript for each interview, which was then downloaded and scored by the author. After scoring, the interview recordings, transcripts, and all related files were deleted from the author's computer and cloud account.

Participants

Ten participants were interviewed. All participants were given pseudonyms and their identifying information was removed from the information in this report. A brief overview of each participant, including their role in the community, is below.

Sam is a 30-year old therapist. They are nonbinary and use they/them pronouns. Sam is white and queer. They work directly with queer and transgender youth.

Kristin is a 28-year old cisgender female therapist who uses she/her pronouns. She is bisexual and white. She sees queer and transgender youth and adult clients.

Tamara is a 32-year-old program manager working directly and indirectly for LGBTQ+ youth and their families. Tamara is Black and uses she/her pronouns. She is bisexual.

Grace is a cisgender queer woman in her upper 30s and uses she/her pronouns. She is a psychologist who works in a medical setting. A major part of her work is seeing transgender young people beginning their transitions. Grace is white.

Jacob is a white, nonbinary community advocate who uses they/he pronouns. They are 26 years old and have been active in local LGBTQ+ spaces for almost a decade, particularly in advocating for legislation to protect queer young people.

Tom is a 61-year-old white, cisgender man who is a local historian and library curator. Tom is gay, uses he/him pronouns, and has been active in the Kansas City LGBTQ+ world since the 1980s.

Michael is a white, gay educational administrator. Michael uses he/him pronouns and is cisgender. He is 45 years old, has a Doctorate in Education, and is passionate about inclusive schools.

Andrew is a transgender man in his early 60s, is white, and uses he/him pronouns. He is a minister and board-certified chaplain working in a healthcare setting directly and indirectly with queer and transgender youth and their families.

Nicole is a cisgender woman in her 40s who uses she/her pronouns. She is a social worker and a former board member of an LGBTQ+ nonprofit organization. Nicole is white and the parent of a queer teenager.

Maria is the executive director of a nonprofit. She is a 38-year-old transgender woman who uses she/her pronouns. Maria is multiracial and has a passion for empowering and uplifting transgender women of color.

Findings & Implications

The Community Readiness Score was 4.1, indicating that Kansas City's LGBTQ+ youth community is in the Pre-planning stage of change. Pre-planning means that the community is ready to start planning an intervention, but not ready to implement. In this case, the LGBTQ+ community is aware that change is necessary, but unsure how to make the change. A number of barriers to change need to be dealt with first, including community member fatigue and burnout, difficulty in accessing up-to-date information on community resources, and a lack of awareness on how to improve cohesion. Those barriers are reflected in the lowest dimension scores.

Dimension	Score	Stage of Change
Community Knowledge of Efforts	3.7	Vague Awareness
Leadership	4.6	Pre-Planning
Community Climate	5.1	Preparation
Community Knowledge of the Issue	3.1	Vague Awareness
Resources Related to the Issue	4.1	Pre-Planning
Overall	**4.1**	**Pre-Planning**

Community Knowledge of Efforts

The first dimension explored how much the community members knew about current or upcoming efforts to increase cohesion. The score of 3.7 indicates that community members are in the Vague Awareness stage, but moving toward Preplanning. Large parts of the community have heard of local groups and they are beginning to understand the purpose or structure of those groups (i.e. scope, target audience, activities).

In interviews, all ten participants listed active organizations in Kansas City. Most commonly mentioned was the Kansas City Center for Inclusion, though it was difficult for some

to recall the correct name. Other frequently mentioned groups were the LGBTQ Commission of Kansas City, the Mid-America Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, Kansas City Pride Community Alliance, Pride Haven, and Our Spot. Transformations was brought up in about half of the interviews, but only two people were aware that they no longer offer drop-in groups for transgender youth. A number of participants brought up the Kansas City Anti-Violence Project and its Passages group, and all but one were aware the group is no longer in operation.

The most common theme in the Community Knowledge dimension was the limitations of sharing information. Community members agreed that most information sharing is done through social media (especially Facebook and Instagram) or through word of mouth. Several participants brought up that not everyone has social media, making learning about events and programs difficult for those who are not connected. Even for those who are on these platforms, users generally only encounter what is shared by their friends or in groups; it is a struggle for organizations to reach new users.

Another information sharing constraint is safety. LGBTQ+ people and organizations may display hesitancy to share resources or information with others until they are sure it is safe to do so. Tamara explained that, "Unless you've got rainbow flags screaming, we accept you here, then the LGBT community is, you know, cautious." In Kansas City's sociopolitical climate, that caution can prevent conflict, avoid traumatization, and even protect lives. Though restricting public access to information can be a barrier to community members participating, some groups have weighed the costs and decided that their members' safety takes precedence. Grace disclosed that her organization was forced to remove provider names and contact information from their website after staff received threats from anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups. She shared that providers have concerns about the wealth of personal information available on the Internet, including their

home addresses. Another group, the Kansas City Public Library's Rainbow Club for LGBTQ+ and allied children ages five through 12, does not release the date, time, or place of their meetings except through direct communication with families. Given the young age of its participants and the controversy around empowering young LGBTQ+ people, the group appears to have chosen to shelter itself from hate.

Despite the fear of sharing, Tamara and Grace both discussed how LGBTQ+ people are talented at networking and educating. Grace said, "I think frequently once somebody feels like they are safe with other individuals, they do share what they know pretty quickly [...] I've seen that over and over, people just being incredibly supportive and educating each other." Tamara shared that she spent a significant amount of time learning the ropes of Kansas City's LGBTQ+ community when she began in her role, and that everyone she spoke to readily shared resources and guides with her.

Leadership

With an issue as abstract as cohesion, interviewees had a lot to say about all levels of leadership, from grassroots organizers to state and federal elected officials. The majority of participants focused their answers on Kansas City and Jackson County legislators as well as board members and agency heads. Ultimately, the community scored 4.6 in leadership readiness to change, showing the Pre-Planning stage. Leaders may acknowledge that the community lacks cohesion, and that the lack of cohesion is a problem, but efforts to to improve cohesion are short-lived or nonexistent.

One idea that emerged in many interviews was whether certain actions from leaders were performative, and whether performative action benefits the LGBTQ+ community. Some participants pointed to proclamations, task forces, and so-called "flag waving" as meaningless

gestures meant to garner votes. Nicole said leaders were essentially saying, "See, we care, without allocating those resources, or without doing things. But we have a proclamation signed, and pictures with people!" Several participants mentioned that the Kansas City skyline being lit up in rainbow colors during Pride Month in June, while the city continues to be plagued with hate crimes and anti-LGBTQ+ school policies, shows the city's cognitive dissonance.

On the other hand, other participants were more congratulatory toward the city for increasing publicized support for the LGBTQ+ community. Andrew said that though the leaders aren't necessarily the people implementing changes, "there are initiatives that are going on in the local government where they are advocating for LGBTQ concerns." Jacob pointed out that 25 years ago, a ban on conversion therapy for minors would never have been brought to the floor in Jackson County. Others said that public support for the LGBTQ+ community in any form is ultimately beneficial.

Nicole brought up that leaders of organizations sometimes fall into the trap of blaming other organizations instead of taking initiative. Maria echoed the sentiment, saying that there is a lack of accountability among program leaders. Both said that leadership expects action from certain groups, but offers few or no resources to support those actions. The most notable example is the lack of support groups for transgender youth in the area. One local group, Transformations, held groups for all transgender youth for several years. In 2021, the organization pivoted its focus to center young transgender women of color (Transformations, 2021). Since that time, no one else has stepped forward to facilitate a new group in its place, leaving many transgender youth and their families without organized support. Some participants blamed Transformations for the situation; others felt that there are existing organizations who should be equipped to take

on the work. Overwhelmingly, the participants who work with LGBTQ+ youth said that their own organizations lack the resources to begin a group.

Community Climate

When asked about the community climate, participants had a lot to talk about. The dimension scored the highest at 5.1, indicating the Preparation stage. The Tri-Ethnic Center describes this phase as, "We are concerned about this and we want to do something about it" (Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, 2014). Not only were participants aware of a lack of cohesion, they were able to identify potential causes and a solution, of sorts.

A major theme in this dimension was the self-siloing of identity factions. Tom summarized the issue well, saying that for many members of the community, "their concern lies with only their stripe within the entire rainbow." Nicole said she does not "see cohesion [...] between the diverse pockets of the LGBT community. Their support is more specific to groups within versus groups between." There was a perception that factions and cliques exist in each identity, and people in those factions rarely branch outside of them to give support to others. Grace summarized an example:

> You might have a leader in the trans community who is very active [...] but their whole focus is on trans rights, which is fine and very appropriate. And then you might have another individual who's very focused on, for example the [Mid-America Gay and Lesbian] Chamber of Commerce, having accessible queer business owners that are safe and communicating that out to queer community members, but that's their focus. And so I don't see a lot of cohesion between those entities or between those people. [...] A lot of their energy is going towards their individual focus.

Most participants pointed toward these silos as a cause for the community's disunity. Participants also agreed that the community knows it has this quality. As Sam said, "Most queer people in Kansas City have an idea that things are kind of fragmented." Nicole echoed the idea: "I do think there is an awareness of the siloing, of the infighting, of the separateness. I think there is an awareness that there's something keeping folks from the bond or connection they would like."

Disparate factions of the LGBTQ+ community are not new; for many years, gay men's issues were considered quite separate from lesbian women's. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the AIDS epidemic was at its peak and gay men and transgender women were dying every day, the queer women who stepped in to care for them were criticized by some women's rights activists for "giving up the fight." History shows that those queer women were more willing than heterosexual healthcare workers and volunteers to care for people with AIDS, and that they comforted many in their final days (Laird, 2022). Perhaps, like Tom suggests, younger LGBTQ+ activists may benefit from seeking the counsel of their elders.

Participants have noticed increased cohesion, notably organization efforts, in the last few years. When exploring causes, more than half of the discussions pointed to the sociopolitical climate. Tom said, "As of late, as things become more obviously oppressive, I think people are recognizing the need to be more cohesive." Grace said that "there's a lot of external pressure on the system, and so I think the system is pushing back against that. And part of that creates cohesion–a common force that we're against." The unifying effect of an outside threat is sometimes dubbed the "common enemy effect" in sociology and has been well-studied. People seem to display more prosocial behavior during wartime or after terror attacks. In Choi & Bowles, 2007, the term "parochial altruism" was coined. Parochial, meaning "hostility toward

individuals not of one's own ethnic, racial, or other group" and altruism, meaning "benefiting fellow group members at a cost to oneself," combine to describe the phenomenon of increased intragroup cohesion when faced with outside threats. The LGBTQ+ community of Kansas City, though sometimes disparate and siloed, has begun to realize that the rights of the community are under attack, and that unity and compromise are needed to move forward.

Community Knowledge of the Issue

Community knowledge of cohesion, in definition and in practice, was the weakest area of the assessment at a 3.1, showing early entry into the Vague Awareness stage. Each interview was begun with a definition of community cohesion to the participants, adapted from Local Government Association, 2002: "A shared vision, sense of belonging, appreciation of differences, equity in opportunity, and positive relationships between diverse people or groups." In several interviews, participants remarked that they had not seen a definition of community cohesion before. When exploring community knowledge of cohesion, most participants noted that it was difficult to define such an abstract topic. Nicole said that, while the community may not know how to define or measure cohesion, "there is an experience and a feeling and a sense that comes with it that can be […] identified. So while they might not label it as cohesion, there is an understanding of a sense of belonging and a bonding."

The related issue of limited capacity of the community was brought up as well. Kristin said providers often go from crisis to crisis, leaving no room for big-picture community building: "There's often a focus on the immediacy of big issues and not building up a foundation." Tamara commented on how cohesion is always in the back of the community's collective mind, but gets deprioritized: "Cohesion is the goal, but sometimes the goal gets lost in the process."

Other participants thought of the lack of cohesion as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sam said that disconnected professionals might not "think about alternatives [to disunity] or even know that something else could be possible," and that people are not communicating about ways to address the issue. Andrew believes "some people are resistant to cohesion because they're worried about what it's for," i.e. the lack of delineated common goals and values means people are less likely to band together.

Resources

Resources that could be used to improve cohesion scored a 4.1, showing the Pre-Planning stage. The major theme when discussing resources available to improve cohesion was the concept of resource guarding. Grace talked about how the LGBTQ+ community is used to being defensive, saying, "We fight for what we have. We have that survival mindset." Survival mindset, or dedication to getting through traumatic situations at any cost, is a common indicator of community trauma (Weisner, 2020). Grace later elaborated on her statement, saying groups do not intend to deprive others of resources, but rather are fiercely defensive of what they have: "It's never like, you don't deserve it, it's more like I can't give up what I've gotten." The feeling may be that sharing resources and support with other subgroups will have the effect of weakening or diffusing that energy, rather than building each other up. "Perhaps their slice of the pie is so small that they don't see any benefit in trying to be more cohesive with other groups who have larger slices of the pie," Tom said.

Almost all participants said there is a high amount of potential resources available for community-building. Volunteers, grant funding, corporate giving, and physical space were at the top of participants' lists of possibilities. The Resources score was ultimately brought down by the lack of concentrated effort to use those resources. As Nicole said, regarding low numbers of

volunteers turning out for events, it is "not because there isn't human capital. But that human capital hasn't been fully engaged. There are people who would like to do more, volunteer more, but the lack of cohesion makes them unlikely to do that." She said that division among groups and the lack of a central, digestible resource for potential volunteers to find information made it difficult to recruit and retain a reliable volunteer force. Others echoed her, saying the perception of conflict between organizations or leaders makes contributing to some organizations feel "like picking sides," Sam said.

Overarching Themes

Equity and Inclusion

Eight of the ten participants talked about historical and current racist, ableist, misogynist, and/or transphobic practices within the LGBTQ+ community. Like in broader society, the practices were generally unintentionally exclusionary and indicate that the core LGBTQ+ community of Kansas City is still relatively early in its journey of learning about privilege and power.

Michael shared a story of a friend, a cisgender, white, gay man, who was interested in becoming the chair of an LGBTQ+ nonprofit board. Michael and his friend discussed that more people of color should be in positions of power; sometimes their role as white people is to use their privilege to empower the voices of those heard less frequently. Michael encouraged his friend to help identify someone else to chair the board, even though it was uncomfortable.

Several participants were frustrated with the continued inaccessibility of spaces meant to be safe for all. Jacob described Kansas City's LGBTQ+ spaces as historically "physically inaccessible, emotionally inaccessible, and also just exclusionary." He reported that his community, made up of transgender, disabled people, found the majority of in-person meetings

and events were simply not designed for them. Exclusion has prompted recent action in the community. In 2022, after moving to a new location, Kansas City Center for Inclusion (KCCI) was brought to task by disabled community members and their allies, as the office was on the second floor of a building without an elevator. In a show of accountability, the organization made a public apology and immediately began looking for an accessible space. "We need more things like that," Sam said. "People listening to each other."

Despite the progress in accountability, some participants reported that racist practices still abound in Kansas City spaces. Maria, whose work centers transgender girls and women of color, discussed how she takes race into account when referring people to resources. She gave an example of a white transgender boy whose parents were reaching out to her, saying they could go to any trans-friendly group for help, limited as those groups may be. On the other hand, when Brown girls need help, Maria feels stuck, "like there's nothing there for them. Nobody's working for them." Three white participants also brought up race as a continued issue in the LGBTQ+ community; none of them were sure what needs to be done to improve provider competency in racial equity aside from more training.

On the issue of intersectionality, Nicole brought up that she has observed a practice of using intersectional identities as a way of pigeonholing people, rather than connecting them. "We can be the same and different, and we're both valid and real [...] and that doesn't decrease cohesion. We can be different from each other and have something in common and be a community. [...] The differences, those intersectionalities, enhance the community." Intersectionality can be used to divide, to make social circles smaller and more niche, but to build community, members must connect across those intersections and recognize the

commonality: That systemic oppression divides people, and that united communities are more powerful than any system.

Geographical Limitations

The Kansas City metro spans two states, expanding across two rivers, reaching into five counties. Participants noted that it is simply logistically difficult to regularly gather in a central place that is accessible to the whole community. Given that fact, the emergence of locality-based groups like Johnson County Pride, WestInd Connection, Northland Pride makes sense. Those groups were praised by participants, several of whom said they appreciated seeing smaller groups of activists working to change policy at the city level.

On the other hand, geographic divisions can make it difficult to feel like the Kansas City area is a cohesive, unified community. As Nicole said, "It's easier to support your neighbors than folks you don't know." Supporting each other, giving advice and resources, and showing up for other groups requires communication and openness, which can sometimes be deprioritized when more local issues take precedence.

Suggested Actions

When using the Community Readiness Model, the best areas to implement interventions are the dimensions with the lowest readiness scores. In this case, the two lowest dimensions are Community Knowledge of Efforts and Community Knowledge of the Issue. Both dimensions involve the greater community's awareness of the topic of cohesion: What it is, how to build it, and what is already happening to achieve it. The community essentially needs a roadmap to improving itself.

In the case of Kansas City's LGBTQ+ community, the actions to improve both dimensions must be intentional about centering the voices and experiences of marginalized

people: People of color, including Indigenous people; transgender people, especially transgender women; disabled people; and women and femmes. The participants mentioned inequity as a cohesion destabilizer in every dimension. To move forward, those with privilege must learn from and empower those without.

A central informational and skill-building resource hub is the first step to increasing cohesion in Kansas City. The resource should begin as a straightforward information hub, designed to share up-to-date information on existing and upcoming LGBTQ+ programs. With successful engagement, that could expand to information on funding opportunities, training resources, and community-building resources. Housing the information hub within an existing organization would lend structural support and sustainability to the effort. The hub should focus on the following goals:

1. Simplifying access to accurate information for regional LGBTQ+ community members and allies

2. Enhancing community-building and intersectional practice skills among providers, especially providers who serve LGBTQ+ youth

3. Creating a common vision and shared values for Kansas City's LGBTQ+ community

Though a multitude of LGBTQ+ resources databases and leadership councils have existed for the region, sustainability and up-to-date information must be the focus of the proposed information hub. Stakeholder engagement and community investment are core to the success of this idea, which may take years to fully develop.

In time, the hub could progress to be a more organized community of stakeholders. There could be opportunities to offer grant writing courses, grant fund dispersal, leadership development, bringing in national educators for the community, and could even become a single

point of contact for resource referral. Though likely staffed by volunteers at the outset, there could eventually be part- or full-time staff doing this work. Again, housing the hub within an existing organization makes those options more feasible.

Sustainable, community-led change is not immediate, nor is it perfect in the first iteration. The chances of success at first are slim, and there will inevitably be setbacks and discouragement. In order to build something that lasts and deeply changes Kansas City, actions must be implemented incrementally, with plenty of self-evaluation, accountable to the most vulnerable community members.

Strengths & Limitations

The author has been involved in the Kansas City LGBTQ+ community for a number of years in a variety of capacities, including organizing a conference of youth-serving professionals. Those connections were extremely helpful in networking with organizations and recruiting participants. The author is (at the time of writing) enrolled in a Master of Social Work program, enabling him to network with professors and classmates to reach a broader audience.

The participants interviewed had a broad range of titles, roles, and experiences within the LGBTQ+ community. From volunteers to paid staff, from parents to providers, the participants were a representative sample of experience. Their contributions were insightful, variable, and central to the author's ability to complete the assessment.

The use of the Tri-Ethnic Center Community Readiness Model was central to the author's ability to complete this assessment in the time given. The model was flexible enough to accommodate an abstract issue, the validity has been proven, and the guidelines are freely available.

This assessment was conducted by a white, masculine-presenting person. The author has been involved in Kansas City's LGBTQ+ community for a number of years, which as noted above is a strength for the recruitment efforts, but can also be a limitation; the author's presence and connections may have limited who was interviewed. The author's internal biases have likely played a role on the community readiness score, the themes of the report, and the suggested actions. The author acknowledges that unlearning unconscious bias is an ongoing process.

The interview process was unpaid. This limited the availability of participants who do not have means to devote an hour or more to work without an immediate benefit. Asking for unpaid labor from marginalized groups is problematic in itself; all participants should have been fairly compensated for their time and wisdom. If reproduced in the future, this project will place more importance on seeking funding to compensate participants.

Possibly as a result of the two above limitations, the project interviewed only two people of color and no youth. An effort was made to engage with BIPOC-focused groups and with young people (i.e. ages 18-24) who have participated in LGBTQ+ youth programming. If reproduced in the future, this project will involve more concerted attempts to connect with those populations.

Finally, the Community Readiness Model advises having two people score each interview, then consult with each other and come to a consensus. In this project, only one scorer, the author, was utilized. In the future, the author of this project should connect with a classmate or community member to better capture unbiased scores.

Conclusion

The Kansas City LGBTQ+ community is at a crossroads. Current legislation, the sociopolitical atmosphere, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on small organizations

have divided and weakened the community. Community members feel isolated, directionless, and like the community is not safe for them. However, there is a chance to improve, an opportunity that is already being seized by several organizations who are motivated to change for the better. LGBTQ+ people in the region are ready to build community, ready to make this community an inclusive, empowering place for everyone; all that is needed is a direction. By uniting providers, easing access to information, and building a shared vision, Kansas City will become more cohesive and lead the way for others to follow.

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