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## Exploring the Impact of Antidiscrimination Laws on Child-Welfare Workers Working With LGBTQ Foster Youth

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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Heather Kesterson

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

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With LGBTQ Foster Youth

by

Heather Kesterson

MPhil, Walden University, 2024

MBA, University of Washington, 2020

BA, LeMoyne College, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth are overrepresented in the foster care system and have unique needs compared to their peers. In the state of Virginia, there is an antidiscrimination policy that protects LGBTQ foster youth; however, it is unclear how this impacts child welfare workers. Past literature has explored the needs of LGBTQ youth, the experiences of foster parents, and policy implications, but not the impact of antidiscrimination laws on child welfare workers. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the understanding of child welfare workers' knowledge, integration, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth. Roe's narrative policy framework was used to evaluate child welfare workers' narratives on the macro, meso, and micro levels. Starting with convenience sampling and then using snowball sampling, 10 child welfare workers, who were current employees of the Virginia Department of Social Services and had experience in foster care, were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis followed Saldaña's inductive coding process, utilizing both first- and second-cycle coding to uncover four main themes: knowledge of policy but inability to articulate it, resources needed, the impact of federal, state, and local politics, and training experiences. The findings of this study can be used to promote positive social change by informing policymakers and leaders on the importance of implementing training related to Virginia's antidiscrimination law, thereby potentially creating more competent child welfare workers.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In the United States, 368,530 children were in foster care on September 30, 2022 (US Children's Bureau, 2023a). Of those children, 5,039 were in Virginia. Studies have found that between 3% to 11% of youth in the general population identify as LGBTQ (Greeno et al., 2022; Prince et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2019) compared to 15% to 30% of foster youth (Bucchio et al., 2022; Mountz et al., 2020; Paul, 2020; Prince et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2019). LGBTQ youth in foster care have disrupted placements, require congregate care placements twice as often than non-LGBTQ youth, have 2.5 times the number of placements are less likely to be adopted, and have increased adverse outcomes (Bucchio et al., 2021; Grooms, 2020).

There is little research on child welfare worker's understanding of anti-discrimination laws and training received on working with LGBTQ foster youth. In Virginia, training for child welfare workers on working with LGBTQ youth is not provided by the Department of Social Services, is not specific to LGBTQ youth, and impacts their competence in working with these youth (Ruane & Doench, 2021).

Chapter 1 includes background on LGBTQ foster youth, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope, and delineations, limitations of the study, and the significance of the study. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary and transition to Chapter 2.

## **Background**

LGBTQ youth experience increased social stress, which includes discrimination, bias, and victimization, and can come from peers, adults, professionals, and family members (Chan, 2020). These risks put LGBTQ youth and increase behavioral health needs to include suicidality, self-harm, depression, anxiety, and substance use (Chan, 2020; Delmonaco et al., 2023; Prince et al., 2022). LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the American foster care system (Alvarez, 2020; Salazar et al., 2023), but the exact number of LGBTQ youth is unknown as specific data is not collected (Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020; Salazar et al., 2023). Many times, LGBTQ foster youth do not have their needs met (Bucchio et al., 2020), are at greater risk of congregate care placements (Greeno et al., 2022; Grooms, 2020), and have greater instability in placements (Greeno et al., 2022; Grooms, 2020).

Several federal policies can apply to LGBTQ foster youth. Both Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause apply to children. Title IX protects students from discrimination based on sex for those attending a school that receives federal funding. In addition, the Equal Protection Clause ensures that every American citizen is protected equally (Redcay et al., 2019). These policies are not consistently applied, so state laws are more important for protecting LGBTQ foster youth. The Virginia Human Rights Act (2020) will “safeguard all individuals within the Commonwealth from unlawful discrimination because of... sexual orientation, gender identity... in places of public accommodation, including educational institutions and in real estate transactions” (para 2). However, there

is no specific training on the act or working with LGBTQ foster youth required in the state of Virginia (Ruane & Doench, 2021).

There is little research on how antidiscrimination laws impact child welfare workers when working with LGBTQ youth. It is unclear if child welfare workers know these laws and how they can impact their work. In addition, there is also little research on how child welfare workers are trained to work with LGBTQ foster youth. Most research has focused on the youth themselves, and some have focused on foster parents. There is little or no research on Virginia's child welfare worker's understanding of the antidiscrimination policy, training on the policy, and how it impacts their work with LGBTQ foster youth. Ruane and Doench (2021) found that child welfare workers do not receive training on working with LGBTQ youth from the Virginia Department of Social Services. The trainings they did receive were often part of another training that did not solely focus on LGBTQ youth.

This study explored Virginia's antidiscrimination policy and training for child welfare workers related to LGBTQ foster youth. This study is significant in that fills a gap in understanding, specifically on Virginia child welfare workers understanding of anti-discrimination laws as they relate to LGBTQ, including LGBTQ youth in foster care. The results of this study should aid the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Virginia Department of Social Services in determining training needs for child welfare workers on working with youth who identify as sexual minorities, thus supporting positive outcomes for these youth. Awareness, knowledge, and/or training are necessary for individuals to make social change. Because LGBTQ youth are disproportionately in foster care and are

more likely to have adverse outcomes, child welfare workers must understand policies and procedures when working with these youth.

### **Problem Statement**

The law ensures that foster youth are not discriminated against due to sexual orientation or gender identity in line with Virginia's Human Rights Act, VA Code Ann. § 2.2-3900. However, another law, VA Code Ann. § 63.2-1709.3, allows child-placing agencies to deny a child based on their policies, religious, or moral convictions. While these laws exist, specific training is not required to care for LGBTQ youth as a foster parent or work with an LGBTQ youth as a child welfare worker. The current training plan does not specifically address working with LGBTQ foster youth even though best practices are provided in the manual for Virginia child welfare workers. This problem impacts foster parents, child welfare workers, and foster youth because even with such protections, LGBTQ youth in foster care continue to have disrupted placements, require congregate placements, have an increased number of placements, are less likely to be adopted, and have increased negative outcomes (Bucchio et al., 2021; Grooms, 2020). Congregate care placement can lead to institutionalization and negative impacts of lack of education and safety concerns (Liu, 2020). Further, Ruane and Doench (2021) completed a review of training for child welfare workers on behalf of the Virginia Department of Social Services and found that training obtained on working with LGBTQ youth was not provided by the Department of Social Services, was not specific to LGBTQ youth, and impacts their competence in working with these youth. The literature reviewed for this study found that others have investigated this problem by focusing on understanding the

needs of LGBTQ foster youth (Salerno et al., 2020), LGBTQ youth transitioning out of foster care (Grooms, 2020; Mountz et al., 2020) and understanding foster parents of LGBTQ youth (Salazar et al., 2019) with little focus on training for child welfare workers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the understanding of the knowledge, integration, training, and implication of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth from child welfare workers in Virginia.

### **Research Question**

What are the perceptions and training experience of Virginia child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theory that grounds this study includes Roe's (1994) narrative policy framework, as cited in Jones and McBeth (2010). This framework will evaluate child welfare workers' narratives on the macro, meso, and micro levels to determine the impact of the antidiscrimination policy and training plan and if any changes are needed. Core elements of this framework include the setting, characters, including those harmed by the policy, the moral or solution to the issue, and the plot, which is the narrative provided by the participants (Gray & Jones, 2016).

The narrative policy framework focused on Virginia's training program's strengths and growth areas for child welfare workers as it relates to Virginia's antidiscrimination

laws and working with LGBTQ foster youth. Individual narratives showed what was important to each participant and what action they believed was needed. From there, narratives were compared to determine what is important to the group, and themes emerged. Recommendations were made to create social changes within the current training structure or recommend new structures (Gray & Jones, 2016). Chapter 2 provides a greater explanation of how this framework will be used in the study.

### **Nature of the Study**

A general qualitative study (Burkholder et al., 2019) was used to explore the understanding of child welfare workers, and the data analysis followed Saldaña's (2021) in Vivo coding process and used first and second-cycle coding. The study sought to gather information from Virginia child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth.

Approximately 3,000 child welfare workers meet inclusion criteria in Virginia. By starting with convenience sampling and then using snowball sampling, the goal was to recruit at least 15 participants for the study. If saturation had not been reached, additional participants would have been recruited. Inclusion criteria included being a child welfare worker in Virginia, a current Virginia Department of Social Services employee, and experience in the foster care and/or adoption unit. Saturation was monitored to watch for the lack of new information being shared and the research questions being answered (Burkholder et al., 2019).

The data analysis followed Saldaña's (2021) inductive coding process and used first and second-cycle coding. In Vivo coding, the words or phrases of the participant were used for data collection, ensuring their voice was heard. First- and second-cycle coding means that the data were reviewed multiple times using at least one type of coding. Initially, codes described what was said during the interviews. Once this step was complete, findings began to emerge. Finally, findings were compared, and themes were better understood.

### **Definitions**

*Child welfare worker*: someone employed by the Virginia Department of Social Services to provide case management and support to those in foster care (Ruanne & Doench, 2021; Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d. -b).

*Congregate care*: placements for youth that are in a group setting rather than a family home, such as group homes, shelters, and residential treatment facilities (Lui, 2020).

*Foster care*: the system in the United States that provides a safe and stable environment for youth who cannot remain in their original home (Bucchio et al., 2020).

*LGBTQ* is "an acronym used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questions persons or community" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023, "Terms to Know" section).

*Permanency*: a stable supportive placement for foster youth. This can include reunification, relative placement, or adoption (Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d. -b).

*Youth*: those aged between 11 and 19 (National Youth Agency, 2023).

### **Assumptions**

During this study, I assumed that all foster youth have the same rights while in DSS custody, regardless of LGBTQ identification. These rights include safety, stability, having both physical and emotional needs met, support, and education (Virginia Department of Social Services n.d. -b). Identifying as LGBTQ should not be a barrier to having a foster youth's needs or rights met. I viewed LGBTQ youth no differently than any other foster youth.

Another assumption I made is that child welfare workers want what is best for all foster youth and do not discriminate against LGBTQ foster youth. Child welfare workers may not know how they feel about LGBTQ youth or have the resources needed to best serve this population (Greeno et al, 2022). Further, specific training is not provided to child welfare workers in Virginia, so it is unclear their knowledge or understanding of working with LGBTQ foster youth (Ruane Doench, 2021).

Finally, I assumed that all participants answered questions truthfully to help meet the study's purpose. I assumed that they were forthcoming with information and ask questions if needed. I also assumed that the questionnaire and qualitative study will be able to answer the research questions.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study focused on child welfare workers and their understanding and impact of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws on their work with LGBTQ foster youth. Child welfare workers have a variety of youth on their caseload, including LGBTQ youth.

These youth have unique needs and policies impacting how child welfare workers work with them. It is unclear if child welfare workers fully understand the policies or are adequately trained in working with these youth.

The study initially included child welfare workers in SW Virginia, as it is a rural area that has limited resources for child welfare workers and foster youth. This was opened to the entire state of Virginia due to challenges faced when recruiting participants. To ensure that workers had experience working with foster youth, those who have worked in foster care and/or adoption were included in the sample. While all child welfare workers may have LGBTQ youth on their caseload, those with experience in foster care and/or adoptions have a different experience with these youth.

The results of this study may be transferable to other locations within Virginia, especially those in rural areas. Insights into the needs of child welfare workers could be incorporated into the current structure of the Virginia Department of Social Services, including their onboarding and ongoing training plans.

### **Limitations**

A potential barrier when collecting primary data is recruiting participants for interviews. Since convenience sampling did not produce the number of participants needed, snowball sampling was used. There was a review of where participants are being recruited to see if there were other options. Since this was a qualitative study with a small sample size, the generalizability of the findings is limited (Burkholder et al., 2019). Using semi-structured interviews can cause participant bias. Given the study's topic, there is a greater risk of participation bias, specifically social desirability bias. Participants may be

more likely to answer how they think I want to hear or what best aligns with society (Zapien, 2017). Triangulation, debriefing, and reflexivity were utilized to address possible participant and researcher bias (Ratvitch & Carl, 2019).

Bias as a researcher has potential within any study. Given my working relationship with child welfare workers, I ensured a clear separation of my professional role and role as a researcher. In addition, it was necessary that I identify and monitor any potential bias on the topic or with participants during the process. I recruited participants from a different locality than where I am employed. In addition, I actively engaged in activities to avoid bias, including reflexivity and debriefing,

Since the sample size was small, there is a possibility of limited differences in participants' experiences, perspectives, and answers. In addition, a small sample size may hinder the diversity of participants in the study. Additional research may be needed in other areas of Virginia to address this.

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that it fills a gap in understanding, specifically on Virginia child welfare workers understanding of anti-discrimination laws as they relate to LGBTQ, including LGBTQ youth in foster care. Other studies have focused on either the foster youth or foster parent, but little research exists on child welfare workers. Child welfare workers play an important role for LGBTQ youth while they are in foster care. Understanding their needs can lead to improvements for LGBTQ foster youth.

The results of this study may aid the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Virginia Department of Social Services in determining training needs for child welfare workers on

working with youth who identify as LGBTQ, thus supporting positive outcomes for these youth. The study may identify additional needs related to the antidiscrimination policy in Virginia and ways to address these needs. It is unclear whether the policy is fully understood; this study will help bridge those gaps.

Awareness, knowledge, and/or training are necessary for individuals to make social change. Because LGBTQ youth are disproportionately in foster care and are more likely to have negative outcomes, child welfare workers must understand policies and procedures when working with these youth. This study will help identify those needs so that the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia Department of Social Services, and local departments of social services can make policy and training decisions. These improvements can lead to improvements for LGBTQ youth while they are in foster care.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided a background for the study and why it is necessary. This chapter provided research questions and a theoretical framework to ground the study along with the nature of the study. Both the limitations and significance of the study were discussed in this chapter. Chapter 2 will include a literature review of previous studies on the research topic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the understanding of the knowledge, integrations, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth from child welfare workers in Virginia. In the United States, 368,530 children were in foster care on September 30, 2022 (US Children's Bureau, 2023a). Of those children, 5,039 were in Virginia. The number of children in foster care has increased over the last two years, and in 2022, the number of children in foster care was the highest in five years (US Children's Bureau, 2023b). While age and race/ethnicity data are collected, data on sexual orientation or gender identity other than male/female is not collected. Even without this information, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system when compared to the general population (Alvarez, 2020; Kassbøll et al., 2022). Studies have found that between 3% to 11% of youth in the general population identify as LGBTQ (Greeno et al., 2022; Prince et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2019) compared to 15% to 30% of foster youth (Bucchio et al., 2022; Mountz et al, 2020; Paul, 2020; Prince et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2019).

Child welfare workers are tasked with many job responsibilities related to children in foster care. This, coupled with limited training and challenging policies, has led to turnover rates between 20 -50% annually, with many workers leaving within the first 2 years of employment (Boonzaaier et al., 2021; King, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Radley & Stanley, 2019).

In the state of Virginia, the law ensures that foster youth are not discriminated against due to sexual orientation or gender identity in line with Virginia's Human Rights Act, VA Code Ann. § 2.2-3900; however, another law, VA Code Ann. § 63.2-1709.3, allows child-placing agencies to deny a child based on their policies, religious, or moral convictions. While these laws exist, specific training is not required to care for LGBTQ youth as a foster parent or work with LGBTQ youth as a child welfare worker.

The current training plan does not explicitly address working with LGBTQ foster youth, even though best practices are provided in the manual for Virginia child welfare workers. This problem impacts foster parents, child welfare workers, and foster youth because even with such protections, LGBTQ youth in foster care continue to have disrupted placements, require congregate care placements twice as often than non-LGBTQ youth, have 2.5 times the number of placements are less likely to be adopted, and have increased adverse outcomes (Bucchio et al., 2021; Grooms, 2020). Further, Ruane and Doench (2021) completed a review of training for child welfare workers on behalf of the Virginia Department of Social Services and found that training obtained on working with LGBTQ youth was not provided by the Department of Social Services, was not specific to LGBTQ youth, and impacts their competence in working with these youth.

The literature reviewed for this study found that others have investigated this problem by focusing on understanding the needs of LGBTQ foster youth (Salerno et al., 2020), LGBTQ youth transitioning out of foster care (Grooms, 2020; Mountz et al., 2020), and understanding foster parents of LGBTQ youth (Salazar et al., 2019) with little focus on policies or training for child welfare workers. This chapter will explore the

literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, literature review related to key concepts, and summary and conclusion.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the following databases to locate the peer-reviewed articles: APA Psycinfo, SAGE Journals, SocIndex, Proquest Central, Political Science Complete, Walden Library, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in this search included *LGBTQ*, *LGBTQ foster youth*, *foster youth*, *child welfare/foster care system*, *child welfare workers*, *burnout*, *child welfare training*, *antidiscrimination policy*, and *child welfare policy*. During the search, emphasis was placed on child welfare workers, especially in Virginia. Multiple searches using these terms in different combinations were completed, focusing on articles published within the last 5 years.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework that was used in this study is the narrative policy framework created by Roe (1994), as cited in Jones and McBeth (2010). A policy narrative has four necessary components: setting or context, plot, characters, and the story's moral (Jones & McBeth, 2010). See Table 1 below, which provides additional information on the components. These components create a story to analyze policies with differing opinions or completing stakeholders (Gray & Jones, 2016; Jones, 2018; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Roe, 1994; Shanahan et al., 2018).

**Table 1***Narrative Policy Framework*

Component	Explanation
Setting or context	What or where the policy is set does not need to be constrained by location (Jones & McBeth, 2010). This can include legal parameters, geography, evidence, and stories (Jones, 2018; Jones & McBeth, 2012).
Plot	The plot has a beginning, middle, and end (Jones, 2018) and includes relationships, characters, and the setting (Jones & McBeth, 2010). It shows causation, which can be intentional, inadvertent, accidental, or mechanical (Jones & McBeth, 2010).
Characters	These vary within each narrative but fall into one of the following categories: hero, victim, or villain (Jones, 2018; Jones & McBeth, 2010). The hero is the person or group ending the harm, the victim is the person or group being harmed, and the villain is the person or group causing the harm (Jones, 2018).
Moral or policy solution	The moral provides support for change or a possible solution to the harm being caused to the victim in the narrative (Jones, 2018; McBeth, 2010).

Regarding LGBTQ policies, there are competing sides, which is a requirement of the narrative policy framework. Jones and McBeth (2010) discussed using the narrative policy framework to analyze policy at the micro level, impact on the worker or local level, and meso, policy outcomes, and levels. Using qualitative stories within the

narrative policy framework can help predict or describe policy outcomes and how they impact those directly impacted by the policy.

Researchers have used the narrative policy framework to study various social policies with competing sides (Jones, 2018). For example, Inman and Jones (2022) used the narrative policy framework to assess school lunch policies. They used interviews within this framework and provided effective data analysis techniques, including coding patterns, themes, and concepts, by looking at the plot's heroes, victims, and villains. They found consensus between the groups on the victim and children, but the different groups interviewed saw the villain and hero differently. As a result, they provided policy recommendations that may appeal to both groups and provide opportunities to collaborate on future policy changes.

Using a similar approach as Inman and Jones (2022), I hope to understand better the heroes, victims, and villains within the child welfare system for LGBTQ foster youth. While there were differing views, policy recommendations can be made based on the narratives provided by the child welfare workers involved with these youth.

## **Literature Review**

### **Unique Needs of LGBTQ Youth**

LGBTQ youth have unique needs not experienced by or experienced more significantly than non-LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth experience increased social stress, which includes discrimination, bias, and victimization and can come from peers, adults, professionals, and family members (Chan, 2020). These risks put LGBTQ youth and

increase behavioral health needs to include suicidality, self-harm, depression, anxiety, and substance use (Chan, 2020; Delmonaco et al., 2023; Prince et al., 2022).

### ***Behavioral Health Needs***

All youth are at risk of behavioral health issues. However, youth who identify as LGBTQ are at an increased risk; 60% of those surveyed disclosed mental health symptoms (Delmonaco et al., 2023). Due to greater rates of childhood trauma, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorder, and suicidality (Delmonaco et al., 2023; Prince et al., 2022). Depending upon the types of trauma experienced, the mental health of LGBTQ youth can be impacted differently.

One specific type of trauma LGBTQ youth face is discrimination. Chan et al. (2022) described discrimination as encompassing verbal abuse, physical aggression, not being allowed accommodations, sexual assault, and burglary. This discrimination can begin as early as 8 years old but is most prevalent between the ages of 13 and 17. Up to 71% of LGBTQ youth identified mental health symptoms as a result of discrimination (Chan et al., 2022). As the types of discrimination are varied, responses to them will also vary.

Delmonaco et al. (2023) and Grooms et al. (2020) found that discrimination contributes to mental health discrepancies for LGBTQ youth. Their identities can become at odds with family and community acceptance (Grooms et al., 2020), requiring them to decide to hide or face discrimination from others (Delmonaco et al., 2023). This

discrimination can cause mental health symptoms or hinder LGBTQ youth from seeking services and resources (Delmonaco et al., 2023).

Over the past few years, discriminatory legislation has been introduced, impacting many parts of an LGBTQ person's life. Kuper et al. (2022) found that anxiety increased for LGBTQ youth when discriminatory legislation was enacted, along with increased use of mental health hotlines. These youth also reported hopelessness and a decreased likelihood of seeking out services, which can cause symptoms to increase. Discrimination is only one of the factors that increase an LGBTQ youth's mental health symptoms.

In addition to discrimination, LGBTQ youth face harassment, including bullying. In school, approximately 35% of LGBTQ youth experience bullying, compared to less than 20% of non-LGBTQ youth (Chan et al, 2023). After anti-LGBTQ legislation was passed, Kuper et al. (2022) found that half of the youth interviewed reported bullying based on identifying as LGBTQ. These youth had an increased use of mental health hotlines and crisis lines. These risk factors, individually and combined, resulted in the increased mental health symptoms and needs of LGBTQ youth.

When asked, youth have shared their symptoms in surveys highlighting the increased prevalence among LGBTQ youth. Groom (2020) found that LGBTQ high school students reported higher percentages of behavioral health symptoms compared to all students. This included sadness, 63% compared to 32%; considered suicide, 48% compared to 17%; made a suicide plan; 38% compared to 24%; attempted suicide, 23% compared to 7%; and being injured in a suicide attempt, 8% compared to 2% (Groom, 2020).

Suicide ideation or attempts can be a symptom of many behavioral health diagnoses, including those that are experienced by LGBTQ youth. Heterosexual youth do attempt suicide, but youth who identify as LGBTQ are 2.9 to 4.3 times more likely to attempt (Praire et al., 2023). In addition, a 2020 survey found that 40% of LGBTQ youth had considered suicide (Delmonaco et al., 2023), while another found that 20% of those surveyed attempted suicide and over half considered (Chan et al., 2023).

### ***Physical Health Needs***

In addition to mental health needs, LGBTQ youth have unique needs as they relate to their physical health. Washburn et al. (2023) found that 31% of LGBTQ youth interviewed did not obtain care for their physical health needs. Various factors were identified, including concerns about what the doctor would say, thoughts that the issue would disappear, and not knowing where to go for care. These findings showed the need for an increased number of providers who are gender-affirming and the dissemination of this information to LGBTQ youth. Even if providers are available and affirming, if LGBTQ youth are not aware, they cannot access care.

Information and access are necessary for LGBTQ youth to engage in healthcare. LGBTQ youth that were interviewed shared that they struggle to find providers that understand both gender and sexuality, are trustworthy, understand and acknowledge LGBTQ needs, and are accessible. As a result, many of these youth turn to online resources for healthcare information (Delmonaco et al., 2023). As the popularity of using the internet for healthcare and information grows, healthcare must keep up with the changes.

Given the vastness of the internet, prioritizing information for these youth is essential to ensure that current and accurate information is provided. LGBTQ youth have shared essential topics, including a place to share LGBTQ stories, intersectional health experiences for LGBTQ youth, and website usability. These youth also shared things they did not want, including too many resources, information that has not been deemed credible, and visuals that are not easy to understand or LGBTQ-friendly (Delmonaco et al., 2023). Ensuring that LGBTQ youth's access to health information meets their needs is critical in ensuring they receive proper care.

Transgender youth have additional unique healthcare needs. Many of these youth lack access to care, and those in rural areas may be unable to travel to a larger city to access if available. Recent legislation has been proposed to limit access to care for transgender youth. Youth in these areas may not have access to care or fear the repercussions of accessing (Kuper et al., 2022).

### ***Resources***

With the increased and unique mental and physical health needs of LGBTQ youth, resources are necessary to help meet their needs. Due to a lack of non-digital resources, limited or no school curriculum, and unqualified professionals, many LGBTQ youth utilize the internet for resources. The types of resources LGBTQ youth seek online include sex education, health information, peer support, behavioral health information, and understanding of their identity (Delmonaco et al., 2023). Online resources are helpful but do have their drawbacks.

The internet is vast, and information is not always current or credible. Delmonaco et al. (2023) found that LGBTQ had different experiences accessing online resources. Depending upon the person's needs, there may be limited information, misinformation, privacy concerns, and barriers to access. While helpful and necessary, online resources do not meet all of the needs of LGBTQ youth and highlight the continued discrepancies in care. While online resources have increased access for LGBTQ youth, negative consequences remain when they cannot be accessed or are limited.

With the limited resources for LGBTQ youth related to information and support, there is an increase in adverse outcomes. When LGBTQ youth lack resources and support related to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, they are at a greater risk of facing discrimination from their families and community. As a result, one option they are left with is to enter foster care (Grooms, 2020; Mountz & Capous-Deyllas, 2020). It is possible that these youth leave and become homeless rather than entering care.

Homelessness is an alternative for LGBTQ youth when they have limited resources and support to avoid entering foster care. LGBTQ youth are often required to decide between their identity and remaining at home, which puts them at twice the risk of homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth. Approximately 20% to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, where they are twice as likely to experience early death, and 10% to 50% will engage in survival sex (Grooms, 2020). Homeless youth lack the necessary supportive adults and resources.

Supportive adults are one resource that LGBTQ youth lack and can be crucial to their success. Youth spend a significant amount of time, approximately 1,200 hours a

year, at school. Adults within the school setting can play a large part in providing support to LGBTQ youth to mitigate mental health issues and substance use. However, these youth lack that support at school due to a lack of understanding of needs and training for staff. Youth with support from school staff experience less bullying and decreased mental health symptoms (Coulter et al., 2024). With the amount of time youth spend at school, education and support can be critical support for LGBTQ youth.

School becomes an essential resource for LGBTQ youth as they may gain support they do not have at home. Many schools do not have LGBTQ anti-discrimination policies, and no regulations require such. Youth at these schools face higher incidents of bullying and assault and are more likely to have mental health and substance use issues along with educational inequalities (Chan, 2022). Providing a supportive school environment can decrease adverse outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

### **LGBTQ Foster Youth**

LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the American foster care system (Alvarez, 2020; Salazar et al., 2023). However, since no data is collected on foster youth sexual orientation or gender identity, the exact number of LGBTQ foster youth is unknown (Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020; Salazar et al., 2023). Many times, these youth enter foster care due to family disapproval, conflict, and/or victimization due to their LGBTQ identity (Alvarez, 2020). In addition, the system is grounded in heteronormative values and practices which may conflict with the needs of LGBTQ foster youth (Alvarez, 2020).

### ***Unique Needs of LGBTQ Foster Youth***

In addition to barriers and challenges all foster youth face, LGBTQ foster youth experience unique needs and challenges due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Bucchio et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ youth do not have their needs met when applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Many times, these youth do not have their basic need of healthcare met, especially those youth who are transgender. This could be due to a lack of healthcare availability or foster parents who lack training or understanding in caring for LGBTQ youth.

Safety needs for LGBTQ youth are often not met when they are in foster care. They may be in an abusive placement, face harassment, or are moved multiple times, which does not allow them to feel safe, be nurtured, or have consistency. (Bucchio et al., 2020). Further, these youth do not have their need for love and social acceptance met. Many times, LGBTQ foster youth face rejection not only by their biological family but also by their foster family and professionals working with them. They often feel rejected, isolated, and abandoned (Bucchio et al., 2020).

Esteem needs cannot be met if the previous needs are not met. LGBTQ foster youth often have to navigate multiple systems while being stigmatized due to their gender and/or sexual identities. They may not feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity or sexual orientation due to feelings of rejection. These youth tend to internalize their feelings of anger and aggression while being isolated and misunderstood (Bucchio et al., 2020). Since lower levels of need are not generally met by LGBTQ foster youth, they are not able to recognize their full potential (Bucchio et al., 2020). LGBTQ youth often do

not have their primary or lower-level needs met, resulting in adverse outcomes and increased mental health needs.

LGBTQ foster youth have greater instances of mental health needs. Mountz and Capous-Desyllas (2020) found that LGBTQ foster youth are three times more likely to be hospitalized for mental health reasons compared to non-LGBTQ foster youth. This can be attributed to the treatment of LGBTQ youth in foster care, including both physical and verbal harassment and overall adverse treatment in foster care.

While it is known that LGBTQ foster youth have greater physical and mental health needs, there remain multiple barriers to accessing care. Washburn et al. (2023) found that LGBTQ foster youth were twice as likely not to seek healthcare when needed compared to other foster youth. One reason could be the lack of affirming care or an inclusive environment. This could be due to a lack of providers in the area for these youth or anti-LGBTQ policies that create discrimination in healthcare or unaccepting environments (Washburn et al., 2023). Without adequate healthcare, LGBTQ foster youth may not be able to remain in the community.

When there is a lack of healthcare providers in the community, youth may end up in a congregate care placement such as a group home or psychiatric residential treatment facility. LGBTQ foster youth are at a greater risk of these placements than other foster youth (Greeno et al., 2022; Grooms, 2020). These placements can cause LGBTQ foster youth to have longer stays in foster care and an increased number of disruptive placements (Greeno et al., 2022). In addition, these youth tend to be placed by the sex assigned at birth and must follow a gender-specific dress code that aligns with the sex

assigned at birth. These practices cause safety, health, and well-being issues for LGBTQ youth (Washburn et al., 2023).

Congregate care placements are more restrictive than foster home placements and have additional barriers to success for youth. The Senate Committee on Finance (2024) explored the treatment of youth in residential treatment facilities. They found that youth experienced sexual and physical abuse, misuse of restraints, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and lack of legal oversight. Since LGBTQ foster youth are at a greater risk of congregate care placements (Ruane & Doench, 2021), they are more likely to experience this treatment.

LGBTQ youth face violations of their rights and protections as foster youth while in care (Salazar et al., 2023), which may be a result of heteronormative practices within the foster care system (Alvarez, 2020). These violations can lead to stressors that fall into one of four categories: structural, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Salazar et al., 2023). As a result, LGBTQ foster youth face increased adverse outcomes compared to other foster youth.

### ***Outcomes for LGBTQ Foster Youth***

All former foster youth are at risk of adverse outcomes; however, LGBTQ youth are at an increased risk due to their treatment while in foster care. In addition, these youth are less likely to build social relationships and receive needed support while transitioning out of foster care (Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020). Ruane and Doench (2021) found that LGBTQ foster youth were more likely to age out of foster care rather than returning to their family or being adopted. Further, child welfare workers are not equipped to

provide resources for LGBTQ youth transitioning out of foster care. There are few if any, policies or programs in place to help child welfare workers help LGBTQ youth as they transition from care (Ruane & Doench, 2021).

LGBTQ foster youth can lack permanency and have multiple placements while in foster care (Greeno et al., 2022; Grooms, 2020). Because of multiple placements, LGBTQ foster youth have higher rates of dropping out of high school (Grooms, 2020; Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020). Further, these youth have higher unemployment rates (Grooms, 2020) and are less financially stable (Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020). Unemployment and lack of education could be contributing factors to homelessness.

When compared with all former foster youth, LGBTQ youth are more likely to become homeless, including couchsurfing (Salazar et al., 2019; Salazar et al., 2023), with Grooms (2020) finding that 60% of the youth in their sample had been homeless. Many of these youth admit to engaging in survival sex while homeless to escape their situation (Salazar et al., 2019) and manage their situation (Grooms, 2020). As a result of being homeless and engaging in survival sex, these youth experience post-traumatic stress syndrome and other mental health issues, including substance use disorder (Salazar et al., 2019).

## **Policies Impacting LGBTQ Persons**

### ***General Federal Adult Policies***

Federal anti-discrimination policies cover all people in the country regardless of their state. The federal government passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects employees from discrimination. This includes discrimination based on sex

(Redcay et al., 2019; Wexler, 2018). Courts have found that sex discrimination, including gender and gender nonconformity, is protected under Title VII but still struggle to apply this ruling consistently (Wexler, 2018).

In 2020, the Supreme Court decided in *Bostock v Clayton County* that those who apply for employment with or are employed by a company of at least 15 employees cannot be discriminated against due to gender identity or sexual orientation (Davidson, 2020). This ruling was also used to prohibit discrimination against transgender patients by federally funded healthcare providers and allowed for a federal ban on discrimination for LGBTQ persons (Davidson, 2020).

While there are federal protections for the LGBTQ community, many times, they are not applied consistently or left open to interpretation. Wexler (2018) found that while there has been an increase in protections for LGBTQ people, there are still significant gaps in federal policy. While Title VII can be applied to LGBTQ employees, no specific federal protections exist. Depending upon where an LGBTQ person lives, the states may interpret policies differently and create laws that limit their protections.

In addition to workplace policy, the federal government has passed protections for same-sex marriages. In 2022, The Respect for Marriage Act was passed. This act federally recognized same-sex marriages and required that other states also recognize same-sex marriages completed in other states. However, the Respect for Marriage Act does not require that states issue marriage licenses for same-sex couples. If the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell* is reversed, same-sex marriage in 25 states would be considered illegal (Deal & Yancey, 2024). As with Title VII, The Respect for Marriage

Act provides protections, but that could change and leave LGBTQ persons with a sense of uncertainty.

### ***General Federal Youth Policies***

Title VII and The Respect for Marriage Act generally apply to adults as children are not yet in the workforce or marrying. Both Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause apply to children. Title IX protects students from discrimination based on sex for those attending a school that receives federal funding. In addition, the Equal Protection Clause ensures that every American citizen is protected equally (Redcay et al., 2019).

Over the years, Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause have been used to protect LGBTQ students. Beginning in 2013, these protections were used successfully for transgender and gender-expansive youth. Multiple cases cited protections of gender identity, including using preferred names and pronouns and restrooms consistent with their identified gender prior to 2016. After President Trump entered office in 2016, previous guidance was appealed, and protections under Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause were applied to only gender at birth in many states (Redcay et al., 2019).

Because of the inconsistent application of federal protections and decisions, they will have different protections depending on where a youth lives. Washburn et al. (2023) examined how these different applications impact LGBTQ youth. They found that states with progressive LGBT proactive policies had higher levels of LGBTQ youth engagement in mental and physical healthcare services. For those states with anti-LGBTQ policies, staff had less training, and LGBTQ were more likely to face

discrimination from child welfare workers. While federal laws and policies are in place, what is enacted at the state level has a greater impact on LGBTQ youth.

### ***Youth Policies in Virginia***

The Virginia Human Rights Act (2020) will “safeguard all individuals within the Commonwealth from unlawful discrimination because of... sexual orientation, gender identity... in places of public accommodation, including educational institutions and in real estate transactions” (para 2). Gender identity does not consider the person’s assigned gender at birth and does not include appearance. Sexual orientation includes the person’s actual and perceived sexual orientation. Before passing this law, Virginia was one of only five states without protection for any protected class. The Virginia Human Rights Act, also known as the Virginia Values Act, made Virginia the first state in the South to specifically protect LGBTQ persons from discrimination and specifically protect sexual orientation and gender identity (Morrow, 2020).

In addition to the Virginia Human Rights Act, Virginia has protections for LGBT persons concerning adoption, marriage and same-sex couples, bullying and hate crimes, conversion therapy, and name and gender changes. Equity Virginia (2020) provides an overview of LGBTQ family law in Virginia. In 2020, the state code was amended to allow same-sex marriage even if Obergefell should be overturned. There is no language in the Virginia state code that restricts LGBTQ persons from adopting. However, there are no protections either. Virginia has a religious exemption clause that allows private child placing agencies to deny placement if it is against the agency's beliefs or policies for both adoption and foster care placements.

Virginia has specific protections for LGBTQ youth. In 2020, Virginia passed a bill that prohibits conversion therapy on children. This applies to both sexual orientation and gender identity. In the same year, the birth certificate law was amended to allow a person to change their gender on their birth certificate without a court order or undergoing surgery. Further, the law prohibits requiring proof of any medical treatment. For someone to change their name, a court order is required. Unlike other states, Virginia does not require notification of this process (Equity Virginia, 2020).

Hate crimes and bullying protections are also extended to LGBTQ persons in Virginia. In 2020, the hate crime laws in Virginia were updated to include gender identity and sexual orientation. This includes enhanced penalties for assault and battery. During this same time, the Virginia Department of Education updated its policies related to bullying and the treatment of transgender students (Equity Virginia, 2020).

In 2020, the Virginia Assembly required that the Virginia Department of Education create policies related to how transgender students are treated, including bullying. Before this, there was an antibullying policy, but it was not specific to gender identity or orientation (Equity Virginia, 2020). In 2021, model policies with specific protections for transgender and nonbinary students were enacted. However, when the governor changed in 2022, these were again changed.

The 2023 Virginia Department of Education Model Policies focused on the rights of parents. According to the Code of Virginia, parents in Virginia have the right to determine how their children are educated. As such, each school division will work with families to determine if policies related to transgender students will be implemented. In

addition, the schools are required to tell parents about a child's well-being, including physical and mental health (Virginia Department of Education, 2023). What information must be shared will be determined by each school individually and may put LGBTQ students at risk of providing information to a parent a child does not want to be shared.

Federal, state, and local laws provide some protection for LGBTQ youth in Virginia. There is an anti-discrimination law that provides broad protection against discrimination, but it is not specific. Similarly, the Virginia Department of Education provides broad and vague protections for LGBTQ youth. This is important as youth spend a specific amount of time in school. Unfortunately, each school district and locality are locally managed, and how these protections are implemented can drastically change depending on where the youth live (Virginia Equity, 2020).

### ***Youth Policies in Other States***

The Department of Health and Human Services is the federal program that provides guidance and oversees state programs. Each state requires a Department of Child Protective Services and a Family Services Agency. These state agencies must “provide safety and permanency and protect their well-being when their family has exhibited an inability to do so” (Groom, 2020, p. 180). Since each state has laws, there are significant differences in how these programs are run, including practices related to LGBTQ foster youth.

While some federal regulations can be extended to LGBTQ persons, individual states pass laws or policies that directly impact LGBTQ persons. In 2022, over 150 anti-trans bills were proposed across the United States (Llyod & Fountain, 2023). Two states

banned gender-affirming care for people under the age of 18, and 18 states have laws that ban children from competing on sports teams consistent with their identified gender. In addition, Texas has classified gender-affirming care for children as child abuse, and Medicaid can no longer be used to fund gender-affirming care in Florida for anyone (Kuper et al., 2022).

Since its implantation, the policy in Texas has impacted LGBTQ youth and their families. There is fear and anxiety for these parents as they worry about their ability to care for their LGBTQ children. They worry about access to healthcare and the possibility of increased discrimination and violence. LGBTQ youth have similar concerns and have expressed experiencing increased discrimination, bullying, and violence. Many have delayed gender-affirming care, do not seek any care, move from the state, or limit interactions with others (Kuper et al., 2022).

Not all LGBTQ policies implemented are harmful; many states have added policies intended to protect LGBTQ youth. Due to a lawsuit filed in 1999, it was determined that New Jersey's Department of Children and Families needed to ensure that LGBTQ foster youth were adequately cared for. As a result, in 2003, the system was reformed to include specific training related to LGBTQ youth for workers and contractors, a focus on recruiting foster parents from the LGBTQ community, increased resources to meet LGBTQ foster youth needs, and anti-discrimination legislation. These structures have helped to mitigate heteronormative bias and increase positive outcomes for LGBTQ foster youth (Alvarez, 2020).

### ***Religious Exemptions***

After taking office in 2021, President Bush announced an initiative to partner with faith-based organizations to meet the social needs of America. This came to be known as public-private partnerships (McClain, 2022). These religious organizations receive government funding and are often the only or largest provider of human services in the area (Sullivan, 2019). One example is social services programs run by a religious institution, including foster care. While this has increased foster care homes and social services, many times, the religious beliefs of these organizations conflict with state or federal laws (McClain, 2022).

Over the years, different presidents have entered executive orders to exempt religious organizations from non-discrimination policies or require their participation. Present Trump's executive order in 2018 removed the requirement of alternatives to faith-based providers and increased concerns of discrimination for LGBTQ persons (Sullivan, 2019). In 2021, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Catholic Social Services when their contract was canceled due to not certifying same-sex couples as foster parents due to their religious beliefs (McClain, 2022).

As a result of *Fulton v City of Philadelphia*, religious exemption from anti-discrimination laws could be granted for religious organizations providing social services. Religious exemptions allow organizations to deny certification of foster families if it is against their religious beliefs, such as a same-sex couple or a transgender person. In addition, the agency can refuse to accept a youth if they identify as LGBTQ if it goes against the religious beliefs of the child-placing agency. In 2022, 11 states allowed state-

licensed child placing agencies to refuse to place and provide services to LGBTQ couples (Woods, 2022). Virginia passed HB 753 in 2021, which allows licensed child-placing agencies to deny accepting LGBTQ youth if it is against their religious beliefs (Luneau, 2022).

### ***Policy Implications***

Whether discriminatory or anti-discriminatory, policies impacting LGBTQ persons have significant implications. Federal policies do not explicitly cover gender identity or sexual orientation, causing policy decisions to be in each state. Because of this, employment protections for LGBTQ employees vary from state to state. Since there are no explicit protections, what is allowed is confusing for both employers and employees. LGBTQ employees may not know if they are protected, which may result in fear of pushing back on the status quo (Wexler, 2018).

While federal employment protections may not impact LGBTQ foster youth, how the state sets these policies will indicate other state-level policies that do impact LGBTQ foster youth. Kuper et al. (2022) discussed the implications for children and their families under policies limiting LGBTQ rights. Parents shared that they feared their child(ren) and that their parental role was limited. LGBTQ youth were fearful for their safety, had increased negative self-thoughts, increased mental health symptoms, and decreased healthcare. In states with discriminatory policies, families moved, ended or delayed healthcare, and considered or changed to homeschooling.

Policies that protect LGBTQ persons have a broader impact than those who are directly impacted. Sansir et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of supportive LGBTQ

policies. In states with policies that allow for same-sex marriage, there are lower levels of bias towards LGBTQ people. In the same states, there were improved attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. These policies will not change everyone's perceptions or attitudes towards the LGBTQ community; however, they can provide a shift in attitudes.

One protection for LGBTQ persons is hate crime laws. The use of hate crime laws to protect LGBTQ youth can decrease mental health outcomes for these youth. Suicide attempts for LGBTQ youth are between 3 to 4 times higher than their high school peers. Suicide attempts for bisexual and questioning youth greatly decreased where hate crime laws were in place to protect LGBTQ youth. In addition, there was a small decrease in suicide attempts for all LGBTQ youth where there are hate crime laws (Prairie et al., 2023). While limited, state-level policies that protect LGBTQ persons can have a significant impact on those persons.

In addition to state policies, agency or programmatic policies can provide positive outcomes for LGBTQ persons. Dutt et al. (2022) reviewed the policies of a drop-in center in Washington State serving women and gender non-conforming individuals. The policies used non-binary, person-first language, which focused on the individual's preferred pronouns and was created in collaboration with those they served. As a result, those who utilized the center had positive health and well-being outcomes, felt connected to the community, and increased connections. While not required by state policy, these programmatic policies allowed greater outcomes for the participants and the entire community.

Since there are no federal protections for LGBTQ foster youth, any policies must be created at the state or local level. Barak-Corren et al. (2022) reviewed 20 years of foster care outcomes and compared them to anti-discrimination laws in those states. They found that in states with anti-discrimination laws, the time to find placement for children decreased, and finding foster homes and/or permanent placements increased. These most significant impacts were seen by children who are considered hard to place, including older children, those with disabilities, and those with other vulnerabilities, which may include LGBTQ youth. Since data is collected on gender identity or sexual orientation for foster youth, the direct impact on these children cannot be identified.

Due to the lack of federally available data, specific states or programs must be evaluated to find results related to anti-discrimination or LGBTQ-affirming policies. Best practices for serving LGBTQ foster youth include affirming placements, gender-affirming care, and nondiscriminatory child welfare practices and policies. For agencies that follow these best practices, positive physical and mental health outcomes for LGBTQ foster youth increase, reunification barriers are removed, there are decreased placement changes and congregate care placements, and increased permanency (Prince et al., 2022). How these best practices are implemented differs between states and agencies, but all promote positive outcomes for LGBTQ foster youth.

Best practices for working with LGBTQ foster youth include gender-affirming policies, including clothing that matches gender identity, access to affirming therapies and services and affirming placements. In addition, policies should help support foster parents with resources and best practices and create an affirming environment (Prince et

al., 2022). As youth age out of foster care at 18, many must navigate the system, including healthcare, independently. In states where there are no protective policies or policies are hostile towards LGBTQ persons, youth transitioning out of foster are less likely to engage in mental and physical health care after leaving foster care. Conversely, states with protective policies showed increased use of healthcare. It is unclear whether this is because of these states' policies or resource availability (Washburn et al., 2023).

The *Fulton v City of Philadelphia* case questioned the impact of religious expectations on LGBTQ foster youth. There was concern that these exemptions would cause stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ youth. In addition, since LGBTQ foster parents were more likely to foster and adopt LGBTQ youth, exemptions would decrease the number of affirming homes for these youth. Differing briefs were provided to answer these questions, but there were no clear answers. However, historical findings have shown that placing children in non-affirming homes has increased negative outcomes for foster youth, and religious exemptions will cause LGBTQ youth to potentially be placed in non-affirming care (Woods, 2021).

Whether religious exemptions harm children have provided lessons that can be applied to child welfare models for working with LGBTQ youth. These models include subordination, where practices are prohibitive for LGBTQ youth, Laissez-Faire, where policies do not address LGBTQ youth, nondiscrimination, and affirmation model, where policies protect LGBTQ youth. Illinois has implemented an affirmation model for LGBTQ foster youth. Youth are placed in affirming placements and receive both affirming physical and mental healthcare, anyone working with LGBTQ foster youth

receive training and support on creating an affirming environment for LGBTQ foster youth, and LGBTQ competency training. Further, LGBTQ foster youth cannot be placed in a home that is not affirming, and workers and foster parents facilitate the exploration of LGBTQ youth experience. Finally, Illinois provides systematic oversight to ensure that LGBTQ youth are receiving the services and resources to meet their needs (Woods, 2021).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990. It was created to end discrimination against those with disabilities. The ADA impacts children and families involved with the child welfare system and has certain protections. While the ADA has been in place for over 30 years, there continue to be barriers to compliance (Powell & Albert, 2021). Parallels between the ADA and LGBTQ policies can be drawn, and lessons learned from implementation and ongoing needs can be utilized.

Multiple cases where the child or parents have filed a lawsuit against the child welfare system due to ADA violations continue to happen in various states. The first recommendation made is to increase knowledge for those in the foster care and child welfare system. This includes workers and legal professionals receiving training on the law and working with children with disabilities, as training for these professionals is often outdated. Parents should receive information about their rights as people with disabilities because many do not know or understand their rights (Powell & Albert, 2021).

In addition to increasing knowledge and training, Powell and Albert (2021) recommend building capacity for the child welfare system to serve children with

disabilities. This includes state and local agencies developing policies to ensure ADA is followed. Local and state agencies should also develop a culture of inclusivity and support for those with disabilities. Creating a supportive culture will help ensure compliance with ADA laws while increasing outcomes for youth in foster care. In addition, localities need to develop and provide resources for parents with disabilities who are involved with the foster care system. For children to successfully return home, parents must be able to complete needed services that accommodate their disabilities. The lack of resources for parents with disabilities can be a barrier to permanency for foster youth.

Finally, Powell and Albert (2021) recommend developing regulations, oversight, and enforcement of ADA at the state level. Many times, the child welfare system is at odds with the rights of a parent with disabilities. States need to create legislation to ensure that ADA is followed by parents with disabilities who are involved with the child welfare system. There is also a need for additional federal legislation to update the ADA to ensure it remains current. Parents stated that they are concerned that judges do not understand the ADA and their needs, leading to decisions that may violate their rights under the ADA. Reform and oversight are needed to ensure that ADA is followed for all involved in the child welfare system.

### **Child Welfare Worker Training**

While there are national policies and regulations related to child welfare, there is no standardized training. Each state has its basic requirements, and then additional training is based on the locality in which the child welfare worker is employed.

### ***Training and Turnover***

Child welfare workers play a critical role in ensuring that children in the foster care system have their needs met, including safety and permanency. Most child welfare agencies have difficulty in recruiting and retaining workers. Annually, approximately 20-40% of child welfare workers leave their roles (King, 2022). These workers are usually within the first few years of employment with the child welfare agency (Phillips et al., 2020; Radney & Stanley, 2019).

The turnover of child welfare workers significantly impacts other workers, families served, and the agency. Workers who remain at the agency must cover caseloads for those who leave. This stresses these workers as their caseloads increase (Phillips et al., 2020; Radney & Stanley, 2019). Families must adjust to new workers, which can extend the process, disrupt progress, and lead to frustration (Phillips et al., 2020; Radney & Stanley, 2019). As workers turnover, agencies spend additional money to train and onboard workers. Turnover becomes costly and may strain the agency's budget (Phillips et al., 2020).

Themes have emerged as to why child welfare workers leave their jobs. These include high caseloads, lack of resources, limited training (Boonzaaier et al., 2020), competing priorities (Boonzaaier et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020), and primary and secondary trauma (King, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020). Child welfare workers may work with aggressive or hostile clients or have a child on their caseload die, which can cause primary trauma. In addition, child welfare workers can experience secondary trauma because of working with others who have experienced trauma. Child welfare workers

who experience secondary trauma are at great risk of mental health needs, including anxiety and depression (King, 2020). To combat turnover and burnout, training and self-care are recommended for child welfare workers (Phillips et al., 2020).

Within the scope of their work, child welfare workers make a variety of decisions daily related to the children and families they work with, including LGBTQ youth. Like many child welfare workers, social workers will follow the Social Work Code of Ethics within their work, which includes helping the well-being of those they serve while respecting their diversity (Bragg et al., 2020). There is an expectation that child welfare workers should work towards social justice and respect the clients they work with (Redcay & Luquet, 20203).

Reid and Houston (2022) found that even with the understanding of respect for those they serve, they may discriminate against their clients. This can come because of the use of an assessment to make decisions without clinical judgement. When workers rely solely on assessments, they can easily discriminate against clients unintentionally. It is recommended that social workers and child welfare workers receive training on human rights and cultural competency (Bragg et al., 2020; Redcay & Luquet, 2023; Reid & Houston, 2022).

### ***Virginia Onboarding Training***

In Virginia, each department of social services is locally administered. There are state policies and expectations, but each of the 120 local departments of social services offices determines how the department will run to meet the needs of its community (Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d. -a). The Virginia Department of Social

Services (2021) provides a training plan for required training, which includes a 6-week onboarding training. Each new child welfare worker will receive this training regardless of which locality they are employed. There are no specific onboarding training topics related to working with LGBTQ youth. Additional training during onboarding is up to the individual locality, so that some workers may receive training during onboarding, but it is not required. This onboarding training is necessary for child welfare workers to learn their responsibilities and skills. However, Radey and Stanley (2019) found that many times, onboarding training for child welfare workers is insufficient and does not adequately prepare workers for their jobs.

### ***Virginia Ongoing Training***

Child welfare workers in Virginia receive ongoing training as part of their employment with the Virginia Department of Social Services. There is no requirement for training on working with LGBTQ youth for child welfare workers or for agencies to provide. In addition, Ruane and Doench (2021) found that there are limited training opportunities for child welfare workers or foster families on the topic of working with LGBTQ youth.

Child welfare workers had to seek training from outside agencies when they wanted to learn more about working with LGBTQ youth. Workers did not feel prepared to serve LGBTQ youth as they did not fully understand their needs and lacked resources to help them. Training on building relationships with LGBTQ youth and resource identification were identified needs by child welfare workers. When workers lack training, LGBTQ youth are at a greater risk of negative outcomes while in the foster care

system (Ruane & Doench, 2021). Since departments of social services are locally administered, a policy change would be necessary for all localities to provide needed training on working with LGBTQ youth.

### ***LGBTQ Training***

To increase positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth, training for child welfare workers is needed. In general, most child welfare workers do not receive training specific to working with LGBTQ youth. This leads to misconceptions about these youth and their inability to meet their needs. In addition, misconceptions and biases can cause child welfare workers to treat LGBTQ youth differently and lead to possible discrimination (Greeno et al., 2022).

Greeno et al. (2022) found that child welfare workers did not know how they felt about LGBTQ youth and felt that they had some potential to be supportive of these youth. However, most believed they had adequate knowledge to work with these youth. Overall, child welfare workers did not believe that the foster care system was protective or supportive of LGBTQ youth. Workers with greater knowledge, including completion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) training, had fewer negative attitudes toward LGBTQ foster youth.

Child welfare workers may recognize their limited knowledge and resources when working with LGBTQ youth. Former foster youth who are LGBTQ identified a need for support and resources as they transitioned out of foster care (Mountz et al., 2020; Paul, 2020). These youth identified child welfare workers as crucial support during their transition from care. LGBTQ youth shared that child welfare workers are unable to

provide the support or resources that they need as they transition from foster care (Paul, 2020). These youth also identified the need for training for child welfare workers on working with LGBTQ youth (Mountz et al., 2020).

Mountz et al. (2020) found that child welfare workers in states or localities that have LGBTQ training and coaching programs for child welfare workers were better equipped to work with LGBTQ foster youth as they transition from care. They recommended that agencies focus on trauma-informed care and intersectionality for all youth in which the agency works. In addition to trauma-informed care, utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs can help child welfare workers ensure that LGBTQ foster youth's needs are met (Bucchio et al., 2020).

Social workers, counselors, and child welfare workers use Maslow's hierarchy of needs to help identify the needs of those they are working with (Bucchio et al., 2020). Maslow's hierarchy of needs focuses on five different levels of needs: physiological, safety, love and social, esteem, and self-actualization. For someone to move up the hierarchy, their needs at the lower level(s) must be met (Bucchio et al., 2020). While not specific to LGBTQ foster youth needs, Maslow's hierarchy of needs can set a strong foundation for child welfare workers to meet LGBTQ foster youth needs.

Overall, child welfare agencies lack adequate training for child welfare workers on working with LGBTQ youth. Even if an agency provides training, workers remain unable to provide LGBTQ youth the support and resources they need. General recommendations include having a clear training plan and guidance for working with LGBTQ youth (Prince et al., 2022). Training should include information on LGBTQ

needs, resources, minority stress, coping strategies, and current misinformation (Kaabsøll et al., 2022; Kuper et al., 2022; Prince et al., 2022). Prince et al. (2022) recommend presenting these training courses in a strength-based approach.

Child welfare workers who engage in specific training related to working with LGBTQ youth are better prepared to meet the needs of these youth. In Washington State, the Division of Youth and Families implemented a policy in 2018 supporting LGBTQ youth. This requires affirming care for these foster youth, using chosen names and pronouns, increased resources, and basic information sharing. As a result, training is robust and ongoing for child welfare workers at low or no cost. Workers who utilized this training indicated increased knowledge and skills needed to work with LGBTQ youth (Salazar et al., 2023).

Not all states have policies or requirements for all workers, but many individual localities offer programs to support LGBTQ foster youth. Two such programs are the RISE Initiative in Los Angeles and the REAL Allegheny Initiative in Allegheny County. The programs combine child welfare worker training with best practices in working with LGBTQ youth. For the child welfare workers, specific initial and ongoing training is paired with coaching. Workers are given skills and resources to work with LGBTQ foster youth successfully. Youth impacted by these programs had stronger family connections and outcomes in and after transitioning from foster care (Mountz & Capous-Desylas, 2020).

Another program that can help support outcomes for LGBTQ foster youth is called Connecting. This program provides training to caregivers, which includes child

welfare workers, on how to build healthy relationships with the LGBTQ foster youth they serve. Within the program, caregivers learn the appropriate and current language used by the LGBTQ community and explore myths and realities for these youth. Caregivers learn effective ways to discuss sensitive topics with youth and understand their unique needs. Caregivers who utilized this program felt better prepared to work with LGBTQ foster youth. As a result, these youth received affirming care, leading to decreased negative outcomes and risk factors (Salazar et al., 2022).

Title IV-E is a federal program funding state and local social services departments to provide care for children in foster care. One aspect of the program is the Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program. This program was created to help workers provide services to the diverse children and families they serve. Those workers who utilized this training were provided with specialized training on working with LGBTQ youth. These workers reported feeling better equipped to work with LGBTQ youth and families (Washburn et al., 2023).

Most child welfare workers hold at least a bachelor's degree in the human services field. Washburn et al. (2023) found that few schools that offer social work degrees offer specific training or classes on working with LGBTQ populations. Bragg et al. (2020) reviewed a course within a Master of Social Work program that was specific to working with LGBTQ persons. Those who completed the program gained useful information and skills to work with those they serve.

Since this course is not part of all programs and a degree in social work is not necessary to become a child welfare worker, topics can be implanted into new or existing

training programs. The course covers policy, history, theory, advocacy, social justice, research, and other topics of importance to LGBTQ persons. The program incorporates coursework and guest speakers (Bragg et al., 2020). While the entire course may not be feasible for agency training programs, portions can be incorporated, leading to positive outcomes and increased skill sets.

While benefits from training for child welfare workers and children are evident, there are still barriers to implementation for agencies or localities. Child welfare systems tend to have heteronormative policies, practices, training, and services. This causes LGBTQ youth to be ignored within the program, and workers are unable to help these youth have their needs met or reach their full potential. Many times, the only way that these practices can be changed is by litigation. Litigation becomes the way for legislation and reform. This process takes time and resources to achieve, and LGBTQ youth continue to face negative outcomes while in foster care (Alvarez, 2020).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The current literature reviewed shows that LGBTQ foster youth face unique challenges that current policy does not always address, and even when there are policies, child welfare workers do not always receive adequate training on working with these youth. In addition, little is known about how child welfare workers experience and incorporate policies for LGBTQ foster youth and how to prepare them to work with these youth adequately. This study aims to understand the child welfare worker's experience with policies that impact LGBTQ foster youth and solicit feedback on ways to improve.

Chapter 3 will include the research strategy and data collection methods used within the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the understanding of the knowledge, integrations, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth from child welfare workers in Virginia. This chapter includes the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and trustworthiness issues.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question was: What are the perceptions and training experience of Virginia child-welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth?

This qualitative study followed a general qualitative study design. This design was chosen as the study relies on the perceptions and experiences of child welfare workers. Qualitative design allows the researcher to understand the participants' perceptions, interpretations, or meanings related to the research topic (Kahlke,2014). The findings from this research will fill a gap in understanding, specifically on Virginia child welfare workers understanding of anti-discrimination laws as they relate to LGBTQ, including LGBTQ youth in foster care.

### **Role of the Researcher**

To gather data from child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth, I utilized a general qualitative approach. Within this approach, I remained an observer as

the interviewer. As an observer, I built rapport with the interviewees, as I was unknown to them. Informed consent was collected. As an observer, I collected and analyzed data from the interviews.

The Department of Social Services does not employ me; however, my current employment is with the program that funds some services for children involved with the Department of Social Services or are in the local Department of Social Services custody. I did not use the Department of Social Services employees within the locality where I am employed; however, staff can change localities. The Children's Services Act is a program in all localities with similar roles and responsibilities. I did not encounter any issues with my employment and participants, and did not interview any child welfare workers with whom I have a personal or professional relationship.

I kept a reflexive journal during the process to monitor biases and/or power relationships. In addition, participants from the locality where I am employed were not included in my study to mitigate any possible power relationships. The study was explained to all participants before informed consent was collected. I provided information on any possible professional or personal relationships I may have within my current employment. If issues related to bias and power dynamics had arisen, I would meet with my dissertation committee to address them.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Child welfare workers in Virginia were targeted for this study. I started with convenience sampling and then used snowball sampling (Burkholder et al., 2019; Patton,

2014) to obtain the number of participants needed for the study. The criteria for participants in the study included a current employee of the Virginia Department of Social Services who works in Virginia and has experience in the foster care and/or adoption unit. Initially, 15 participants were sought for the study. Saturation was monitored, watching for the lack of new information being shared and the research questions being answered (Burkholder et al., 2019). If saturation was not reached, additional participants would have been recruited.

Publicly available contact information for child welfare workers was used for the initial recruitment of participants in the study. Child welfare workers were emailed information about the study and invited to respond if they met the inclusion criteria, wanted to participate, or wanted additional information. In addition, those contacted were asked to share with colleagues who met the inclusion criteria and may be interested in participating.

### **Instrumentation**

Prior to completing the study, I consulted with others who have completed qualitative studies and researched the topic. To learn about the topic, I used semi-structured interviews with participants. This allowed me to learn about their perspectives and experiences regarding LGBTQ foster youth and Virginia's anti-discrimination law. Open-ended interview questions were used with each participant during the interview. Interview questions were created to gather information on participants' understanding, training, and barriers related to the topic. Before interviews with participants, I completed

mock interviews with colleagues to ensure that the questions were straightforward and gathered the desired information.

Participants were provided with a virtual option, Microsoft Teams, to complete the interview. Safety measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality for those who completed a virtual interview. This included using a private space for the interview and secure retention of the recording. During the interview, the interview protocol questions were used with each participant, and I acted as the data collection tool. Each participant was asked the same semi-structured questions during the interview.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Initially, 15 current Virginia Department of Social Services child welfare workers were recruited to complete an interview using convenience sampling from publicly available contact information. When additional participants were needed, snowball sampling was utilized. An email (Appendix A) was sent to a publicly available email address. Any child welfare worker interested in participating reached out via email for additional information or to schedule an interview. Once an interview was scheduled, informed consent was emailed to the participant. The participant completed and emailed back prior to the scheduled interview.

I completed a single interview with the participants to collect the data for this study. The interview consisted of 19 questions (Appendix B). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and a videoconferencing program, Microsoft Teams, was used to complete and record the interviews. Saturation was monitored, and snowball sampling was utilized to obtain additional participants. Once the interview had concluded,

interviewees were offered the chance to debrief. Additionally, all participants were provided with my contact information and encouraged to reach out if they had questions or wanted to request a debrief.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed using Microsoft Word. The transcripts were reviewed to ensure that all identifying information was removed, and participants were provided with unique identifiers. Transcripts and recordings were reviewed to verify correctness. Grammar and spelling were checked for correctness in the transcripts. Once completed, data analysis began.

Data analysis followed Saldaña's (2021) inductive coding process and used first and second-cycle coding. In Vivo, coding uses the words or phrases of the participant for data collection, ensuring their voices are heard. First- and second-cycle coding ensures that the data is reviewed multiple times using at least one type of coding. Initially, codes will describe what was said during the interviews. Once complete, findings emerged. Finally, the findings were compared, and themes began to be understood.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is often referred to as validity. Validity makes readers feel confident in the researcher's findings and is true to the participants' experiences. There are four main criteria for validity: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

### ***Credibility Strategies***

Credibility ensures that the researcher is using a design and instrument that can account for all data and explain differences. This leads to readers being confident in the findings. To ensure this, I used data triangulation where participants were interviewed at different times of day, from other localities, and had various backgrounds. This allowed for a variety of answers from participants. In addition, member checks were performed to ensure that I understood what participants said and allowed them to clarify information if incorrect. Participants were able to double-check transcripts for correctness (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

During the process, I engaged in peer debriefing. This allowed me to challenge my potential bias and interpretation of the data. Those within the field and outside were used to gather feedback. Finally, a reflexive journal was used during the process. I noted how the interviews went, any potential bias, things that went well, what I needed to work on, and the next steps. This allowed me to debrief and prepare for subsequent and/or follow-up interviews.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability refers to the data and its ability to remain consistent. Dependability can be achieved by triangulation of data. This was done by using a variety of participants. Additionally, interviews were conducted at various times and locations, allowing for diverse data. The selection of methodology and research design was necessary to ensure dependability. Research questions were written and answered using the data collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

### ***Confirmability***

While qualitative research is not objective, it is confirmable. This means that the research is subjective but free from researcher bias. Reflexive journaling and external audits were used to ensure my bias would not influence findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Using the journal, I could identify and address any potential bias during the process. Additionally, peer debriefs were utilized to enable others to identify any potential bias and assist me in addressing it.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Before beginning interviews, IRB approval and any necessary institutional permissions were obtained. All participants were treated with respect and in an ethical manner. All data collected was kept confidential, and participants were made to feel safe during the process. To ensure comfort, all participants were interviewed using their preferred method.

Before completing the interview, participants were verbally asked for consent to continue. The participants were reminded that they can end the interview at any time and refuse to answer any questions. Given the nature of the study, participants' information will be confidential rather than anonymous. All names and other identifying information were removed from the final data or data provided in the final project. A pseudonym was provided to each participant to protect their identity. Any demographic information collected and used in the final report will not be shared, so the reader cannot deduce a participant's identity.

Data were saved in an account only I can access. Both that account and my computer have a password that I only know. Documents containing data, recordings, or transcriptions will be password-protected and retained for a period of 5 years. Any data shared with my committee had identifying information removed before sharing. All codes created with identifying information were saved in a different location from the coded data, which only I can access.

Given my working relationship with child welfare workers, ensuring a clear separation of my professional and research roles was necessary. To ensure this, participants were recruited from agencies outside the locality where I am employed. This provided separation between the participants and me. Additionally, I disclosed my role and the location where I am employed to ensure that no participants have previously worked with me.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 described the study's design and research methodology. It also provided an overview of the data analysis plan and the research question. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were discussed to ensure participants' confidentiality. Chapter 4 will discuss the findings of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the understanding of the knowledge, integrations, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth from child welfare workers in Virginia. What are the perceptions and training experience of Virginia child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth?

This chapter will include information related to data collection and analysis. This will include the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results.

### **Setting**

For this study, child welfare workers in the state of Virginia were recruited. The Interview Protocol (Appendix B) was used to obtain rich feedback from the participants. Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams and audio recorded. During the interviews, notes were taken on key points and used for further discussion. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to participants for review.

Two participants were influenced by the recent federal changes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Personal and organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences were captured within the interview responses. Significant changes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion occurred at the federal level

during the data collection phase of the study. Feedback related to these changes is captured in several of the participant responses.

### **Demographics**

A total of 10 participants were interviewed for the study. Initially, 15 participants were sought for the study. Saturation was monitored, and after 10 interviews were completed, there was a lack of new information provided to answer the research question. All 10 are employed by the Virginia Department of Social Services across the state of Virginia. Participants are child welfare workers with experience working in foster care and/or adoptions. Participants had between 3 months and 39 years of experience in child welfare (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

#### *Demographic Description*

Participant	Longevity in child welfare
Participant 1	14 years
Participant 2	19 years
Participant 3	3 months
Participant 4	39 years
Participant 5	17 years
Participant 6	6 years
Participant 7	4 years
Participant 8	13 years
Participant 9	10 years
Participant 10	4 months

### **Data Collection**

Emails were sent to publicly available email addresses of child welfare workers in Southwest Virginia after obtaining IRB approval. Those who responded were screened to

ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were asked to share the invitation with others who may be interested in participating in the study. After attempting to recruit 15 participants from Southwest Virginia for four months, a request was made to the IRB to expand the recruitment area to the entire state of Virginia. Once the change was approved, emails were sent to the publicly available email address to all child welfare workers in Virginia. They were also asked to share the survey with anyone who might be interested in participating.

After determining eligibility, participants were sent an email consent to participate in the study. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for participants. Microsoft Teams was used to complete and audio-record the interviews. Microsoft Word was used to transcribe the interviews. Participants provided consent for recording and participating in the interview before the questions began. Participants were given the opportunity to participate in a debrief session if desired. All participants were provided with a copy of the transcript to review.

### **Data Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants. Transcription was completed from recordings using Microsoft then reviewed for correctness, spelling, and grammar. Reading and rereading the transcripts helped me familiarize myself with the data. After transcribing and reviewing, each question was moved to an Excel sheet to allow for coding.

Saldaña's (2021) inductive coding process, which allowed codes to form directly from the participants' answers, was used. First cycle codes were created using in vivo

coding. These codes enabled me to retain the language as closely as possible to the participants' own words. During the second cycle coding, patterns began to emerge. Words and phrases that were similar began to group together. Finally, those words and phrases were put into clusters where four main themes emerged.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is often referred to as validity. Validity makes readers feel confident in the researcher's findings and is true to the participants' experiences. There are four main criteria for validity: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

#### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility, triangulation was used. Participants were recruited from various localities across the state, had diverse backgrounds, and held different roles, yet still met the inclusion criteria. Additionally, all participants were provided with a copy of the transcript and given the opportunity to provide feedback or suggest changes. No changes were requested by the participants. Reflexive journaling was also used to identify what was going well and to explore potential barriers. One of the questions was found to be redundant and was asked twice during the interview. Both peer debriefing and reflexive journaling were used to identify any potential bias during the process.

#### **Transferability**

Transferability was established by outlining participant requirements clearly, which made the demographics for child welfare workers clear. They were also broad enough to be modified if needed or desired for future research. This study can be applied

to child welfare workers in various roles, with different levels of experience, and across different regions of the state.

### **Dependability**

Triangulation was used to gather a variety of participants with differing backgrounds and experiences. Participants were from different localities across the state, and interviews were conducted at different times and on different days. Using a generic qualitative design allowed participants to share their individual experiences. The same research questions were asked of all participants, and an audit trail was used in the data analysis phase.

### **Confirmability**

Reflexive journaling and external audits were used to ensure that my bias did not influence findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Using the journal and peer debriefs, I was able to identify and address any potential bias during the process. An audit trail was also used to help demonstrate how the results were obtained during the data analysis process. Using these techniques, bias that may have been encountered was identified and mitigated.

## **Results**

This section contains the results from the interviews completed for this study. Open-ended questions were used during semi-structured interviews to answer the research question for this study. Ten child welfare workers from across the state of Virginia with experience in foster care and/or adoption provided data for the study. The answers to these questions were used to create codes and themes directly related to the

study's topic. Themes that emerged were knowledge of policy, resources needed, politics, and training experiences.

**Theme 1: Most participants were aware of the anti-discrimination law; however, most could not articulate it**

Participants were asked about their knowledge of Virginia's anti-discrimination laws. Seven out of 10 participants stated that they were aware of Virginia's anti-discrimination laws. Of those 7, three said that they could not explain the law. Two participants were able to provide an understanding of the law beyond avoiding discrimination. For example, Participant 5 said, "we can't discriminate against who they are put with. We're supposed to match them with people that are the same. We should be culturally sensitive to all of that."

Participant 5 continued to share how they ensure that children have someone to connect with and feel safe and secure in their placement. She discussed providing training and support to the foster parents to ensure that a child's needs are met in a culturally appropriate way. In response to being asked about experience working with LGBTQ foster youth. Participant 8 said, "As a supervisor, closed several homes based on placement of children, and then felt like these kids were not treated fairly due to their identity. I closed their homes and would not relicense them."

**Theme 2: Ongoing training received by child welfare workers comes from outside the Virginia Department of Social Services**

Participants shared that there are requirements for annual ongoing training for child welfare workers. Eight out of 10 participants shared that most training is not

provided by the Virginia Department of Social Services. Participant 1 shared, “I don’t know a lot about ongoing trainings that are offered by DSS. I find it on my own or by word of mouth.” Participant 2 said, “You can go through and pick some on the Learning Center from VDSS, but mostly you’re getting those in the community.” Participant 6 shared, “There was some here and there. The trainings were just another to do. They didn’t really necessarily support what I was really doing.” Participant 8 said “you kind of have to look for it. It’s a very gray expectation of continuing education. If you don’t go look for it, I don’t think it really exists.” Participant 9 shared “it’s not directly from the state of Virginia. Nobody seems to be monitoring that.”

Nine participants reported that most training has remained virtual since the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those who discussed online training, all would prefer that they be back in person. One participant shared that training opportunities from the Virginia Department of Social Services tend to focus on new programs. Another shared that training materials are not updated and are not consistent between roles within the agency. When asked about topics offered, no participants shared that the Virginia Department of Social Services provide training on working with LGBTQ foster youth or Virginia’s Antidiscrimination Law.

### **Theme 3: Additional training on Virginia’s Anti-discrimination Law related to LGBTQ foster youth is needed at all levels**

Participants shared how they believed that training offered by the Virginia Department of Social Services impacted workers on the micro, meso, and macro levels. When asked about how training has impacted their individual work with LGBTQ foster

youth, most shared that it's had no impact on them, as they haven't received training from the Virginia Department of Social Services. Participant 6 shared, "I've had to do trainings on my own and get resourceful." Participant 8 said, "I don't think it does. I don't think any of it has come from the state." Finally, Participant 10 shared, "I would say it's very limited when it comes to LGBTQ+ youth."

When asked how training offered by the Virginia Department of Social Services impacts their local department, two participants shared that the training is done at the local level, 3 participants shared that they think it would be beneficial if offered but is not, and 1 shared that leadership is cutting diversity training. Participant 10 said

Leadership is cutting diversity training. You can have local efforts, but local efforts have to tie into a bigger machine. But training itself has been limited in my honest view, if at all. You can have a slide about it, but that's not training.

At the state level, participants believe that current training has little or no impact as it isn't offered. They believe that it would be beneficial. Four participants discussed how diversity topics can't be discussed due to legislation or the location of the department in Virginia. Participant 2 shared, "The training they go through doesn't address it at all," and participant 6 said, "Probably not much."

All 10 participants shared that they need or would like additional training on working with LGBTQ foster youth. Four participants shared that additional training or guidance on working with LGBTQ foster youth would be beneficial for their locality. Seven participants shared that additional training on working with LGBTQ foster youth

was needed at the state level. Participant 4 shared, “we probably need the same type of training that teachers have as far as addressing LGBTQ youth.”

**Theme 4: Politics and/or region play a major role in working with LGBTQ foster youth at all levels**

Four participants discussed the impact of politics and/or region of Virginia on working with LGBTQ foster youth. This impacted both training opportunities and policy alignment. Participant 5 shared

Given where we are with the Big Beautiful Bill, I’ll just say I don’t know that we’re going in the right direction. We’re not allowed to talk about it [LGBTQ] in training. That’s going to have a huge impact on the way that we do business. I’m very nervous about what direction this is going to take us in and what it’s going to, how it’s going to impact our system as a whole.

Participant 10 said

I mean there’s a contrast. Because if you’re telling me that we should, you know, federally or if you have anti-discriminatory laws, but then you’re getting your funding cut for like specific things that are, you know targeted for diverse people, then there’s sort of like a contrast. You’re supposed to protect different types of people, but then if you’re cutting the funding to protect different types of people, then are you actually doing it?

When asked about supports for child welfare workers when it comes to LGBTQ foster youth, Participant 6 shared “that’s heavily based on politics.” Participant 6 shared the community “is more liberal and it does fund a lot of organizations to support.

Participant 10 said “leadership is cutting diversity training,” and that “you can have local efforts” but “depending upon where you are in Virginia things are very different.”

Three participants shared that region plays a role in policy and implementation as it relates to LGBTQ foster youth and Virginia’s antidiscrimination law. Participant 8 shared

Virginia can be broken up into three different states. I think it has a huge impact on the Northern Virginia region and how they do their work. Central Virginia I think is kind of hit or miss and then more of a miss in my opinion than a hit. I think there are a lot of localities in rural or smaller areas... that are stuck in their ways. They’re not willing to go above and beyond the basic legal aspects.

When asked about impact of Virginia’s anti-discrimination laws at the macro level. Participant 10 shared “depending upon where you are in Virginia, things are very different.” Participant 6 said, “It depends upon region. It depends on what the community is looking like and what the community speaks about. I feel like in some areas I’m sure it [anti-discrimination policy] has some sort of impact, but probably not at all.”

Virginia has an anti-discrimination policy that highlights protections afforded to LGBTQ foster youth. Participants highlighted that a basic awareness of the policy but that there is a lack of an in-depth knowledge or understanding of how the policy protects LGBTQ foster youth. Training on working with LGBTQ foster youth was a highlighted need by all participants for themselves, their agency, and the Virginia Department of Social Services. Significant federal changes occurred during the data collection process and were highlighted in last several interviews.

## Summary

Chapter 4 describes the study's setting, participant demographics, data collection and analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness, and study results. Data analysis arrived at four themes: (1) Most participants were aware of the anti-discrimination law; however, most could not articulate it, (2) Ongoing training received by child welfare workers comes from outside the Virginia Department of Social Services, (3) Additional training on Virginia's Anti-discrimination Law related to LGBTQ foster youth is needed at all levels, and (4) Politics and/or region play a major role in working with LGBTQ foster youth at all levels. These 4 themes were used to answer the research question: What are the perceptions and training experience of Virginia child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth?

Chapter 5 will cover the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the understanding of the knowledge, integration, training, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth from child welfare workers in Virginia. Studies have found that 15% to 30% of foster youth identify as LGBTQ (Bucchio et al., 2022; Mountz et al., 2020; Paul, 2020; Prince et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2019), and these youth have disrupted placements, require congregate care placements twice as often as non-LGBTQ youth, have 2.5 times the number of placements, are less likely to be adopted, and have increased adverse outcomes (Bucchio et al., 2021; Grooms, 2020). There is little research on child welfare workers' understanding of anti-discrimination laws and the training received on working with LGBTQ foster youth. In Virginia, training for child welfare workers on working with LGBTQ youth is not provided by the Department of Social Services, is not specific to LGBTQ youth, and impacts their competence in working with these youth (Ruane & Doench, 2021).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were completed with 10 child welfare workers who met the inclusion criteria. After collecting data, four themes emerged: knowledge of policy, resources needed, politics, and training experiences. While most child welfare workers stated they were aware of the anti-discrimination law, most could not articulate it. Findings revealed that most participants did not receive training on the policy or working with LGBTQ youth, and the training that was received came from

outside of the Virginia Department of Social Services. The interviews also highlighted the impact of politics and locality on such policies.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

#### **RQ1**

The research question was the following: What are the perceptions and training experience of Virginia child welfare workers on their knowledge, integration, and implications of Virginia's antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ foster youth? Participants shared that most of them are aware of Virginia's anti-discrimination law; however, very few were able to articulate it. This policy outlines protections for LGBTQ foster youth related to placement and treatment (The Virginia Human Rights Act, 2020). Without knowledge of the policy, workers would not be able to adequately ensure that those protections are followed. Further, participants shared that they do not receive training on the policy or working with LGBTQ foster youth. Initial training is provided by the state, but after that, they are required to find their own training with little guidance or requirement.

Training is important for two reasons: to prevent burnout and/or turnover (Phillip et al., 2020), and to understand the unique needs of LGBTQ+ foster youth (Bucchio et al., 2020; Grooms, 2020). This study found that child welfare workers generally receive onboarding training in alignment with Virginia Department of Social Services policy. Similar to Radey and Stanley (2019), this study found that workers did not find the training sufficient and desired additional topics to be included. When considering ongoing training, this study yielded similar results to Ruane and Doench (2021), finding

that most training is not provided by the Virginia Department of Social Services and does not include LGBTQ topics. This study further found that workers desire additional training, especially in relation to LGBTQ and diversity topics. Participants also expressed a desire for in-person training rather than virtual training.

Finally, participants shared that politics and region play a role in training and practice related to LGBTQ foster youth. This is similar to how protections are implemented within Virginia's school systems (Virginia Equity, 2020). These differences in locality are important to note, as Reid and Houston (2022) found that even with knowledge, some workers may still discriminate against their clients. This study found that the region may play a significant role in how workers interact with their LGBTQ clients, resources available, and training received.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Roe's (1994) narrative policy framework, as cited in Jones and McBeth (2010), was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This framework was used to evaluate child welfare workers' narratives on the macro, meso, and micro levels to determine the impact of Virginia's anti-discrimination policy and training plan, and if any changes are needed. At the micro level, participants shared that they would benefit from additional training on working with LGBTQ youth. Since most were not able to articulate the anti-discrimination policy, they would benefit from additional training and support on the policy. At the meso level, there were mixed needs related to training. Participants reported that different localities offer varying levels of support and training for their workers. Without clear guidance and expectations, workers will receive different levels

of support and training based on their location within the state. Finally, several participants discussed macro changes and challenges related to discrepancies between state and federal policy. They also shared concerns about how the policies and changes from the macro level(s) will impact on their day-to-day work and funding.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study included the data collection method and the research sample. The use of semi-structured interviews can cause participant bias. Due to the study's topic, social desirability may lead to participant bias. They may have wanted to answer questions about how they thought the researcher wanted them to or to best align with society (Zapfen, 2017). During the interviews, the participants answered the questions professionally, openly, and honestly. I do not have any reason to believe that bias impacted participant's answers to the interview questions.

Second, the small sample size of 10 participants can limit the transferability of the study. A small sample size can limit the diversity of participants. Since the participant pool was expanded to include all of Virginia, there was greater diversity among those interviewed. Additionally, the small sample size may have hindered the detection of differences in perceptions and experiences. Both of these limitations could be addressed in further studies by using a larger sample size or different inclusion criteria.

### **Recommendations**

The study identified the need for additional training offered by the Virginia Department of Social Services related to LGBTQ youth and Virginia's anti-discrimination law. There are currently no requirements requiring such training.

Additionally, outside of the initial onboarding training, training requirements are often vague or not consistently enforced. There is a need for additional research into training curriculum options, best practices, and the implementation of training curricula. This will ensure that child welfare workers receive the needed training to effectively work with LGBTQ youth, ensure their rights are protected, and combat burnout among the workers.

The study also revealed the concerns of child welfare workers regarding the implications of the Big Beautiful Bill and other federal policies on their local Department of Social Services. Further research is needed on the immediate and long-term effects of such policies. Workers voiced concern about how these policies impact day-to-day work and funding for the programs. It is unclear how these changes have affected workers, but there is a need for further information to help them make informed decisions. Finally, since participants mentioned the differences between localities, it would be important to further explore these differences. There is a perception that differences exist, but this study did not determine whether this is true or to what extent. This is crucial to ensure that all workers receive the same training and expectations related to anti-discrimination laws. This will also ensure that LGBTQ foster youth are provided with the same opportunities.

## **Implications**

### **Social Change**

This study has the potential to impact a variety of stakeholders, including child welfare workers, LGBTQ foster youth, policymakers, and the Virginia Department of Social Services. First, child welfare workers were able to voice their need for additional

training. This training can provide valuable information on working with LGBTQ youth and Virginia's anti-discrimination policy. In addition to providing knowledge on the subject, lack of training is one reason for burnout and turnover among child welfare workers. Workers may feel supported and confident in their work, leading to longevity in their roles and better outcomes for the youth they serve. Further, child welfare workers could have clarity and consistency about the policy and expectations on working with LGBTQ foster youth.

LGBTQ foster youth would benefit from having a better-trained and competent staff. Since these youth have increased negative outcomes, having a better-trained staff would help meet those needs. There are also protections for LGBTQ foster youth, and having staff aware and trained on those policies will ensure that the rights of LGBTQ foster youth are not violated. If their rights are violated, child welfare workers would understand how to manage and mitigate the situation. Since training helps with staff retention, LGBTQ foster youth would benefit from keeping the same worker and not experiencing staff turnover.

Both the Virginia Department of Social Services and policymakers can use this study to inform their policies on training requirements for child welfare workers. Workers want to receive additional training, but there is currently no clear plan or expectation for this. The Virginia Department of Social Services can use the study results to explore needed changes to their training plan and how current child welfare workers believe they could best be served. Policymakers can see that, while the policy exists, those who need to know and understand it do not. They may want to consider ways to

ensure that those working with LGBTQ foster youth are fully aware of their role and responsibility as it relates to LGBTQ foster youth. There is also a perception that, depending upon where the local department is located, how the policy is trained and implemented will change. Policy makers can work to ensure that the policy is followed and implemented consistently across Virginia.

### **Practice**

This study has a positive impact on both child welfare and public policy. The study emphasizes the importance of ongoing training for child welfare workers. This includes policies, as the participants shared that they were aware of the policy but could not articulate it. They all expressed a desire for additional training. This can happen at the local level, but it should also be consistent across the state. The study also highlighted a perception that there are discrepancies between localities in the implementation, training, and practice of the anti-discrimination policy. With the changes at the federal level, confusion persists about the impact and implications of these changes. Both policymakers and the Virginia Department of Social Services may need to provide additional guidance and oversight to help workers better understand the changes at the federal level.

### **Conclusion**

This study fills a gap in the literature regarding child welfare workers' understanding of Virginia's anti-discrimination policy. It found that while most child welfare workers are aware of Virginia's anti-discrimination policy, they are unable to articulate it. The study highlighted the need for additional training for child welfare workers on both policy and working with LGBTQ foster youth. There is a lack of training

offered by the Virginia Department of Social Services beyond the initial onboarding of a worker. There is an expectation of ongoing training for workers, but it does not appear to be consistently completed or followed up on. Training is crucial for child welfare workers as it helps combat burnout and turnover. Further, LGBTQ youth have specific protections under the anti-discrimination policy, but without training, child welfare workers are not aware of those protections or how to ensure them.

In addition to training needs, a perception persists that discrepancies exist between localities in Virginia. These discrepancies exist in training, policy enforcement, acceptance of LGBTQ youth, resources, and local policies. In addition to these discrepancies, there have been multiple changes at the federal level. There is a need for consistency and communication on policies related to LGBTQ foster youth for child welfare workers. This can help workers understand what they need to do and how to ensure that LGBTQ foster youth's needs and rights are being met.

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### Appendix A: Invitation to the Potential Participants

You are invited to share your views for a study titled: Exploring the Impact of Antidiscrimination Laws on Child-Welfare Workers Working with LGBTQ Foster Youth

One 60-minute interview that will be audiorecorded (no videorecording)

- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Interviews will take place during April.

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Current child welfare worker in Southwest Virginia; and
- Employed by the Virginia Department of Social Services; and
- Experience in foster care and/or adoptions.

Please email to let the researcher know of your interest

## Appendix B: Qualitative Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked in child welfare?
2. What interested you in child welfare, specifically foster care and/or adoption?
3. Tell me about becoming a child welfare worker in Virginia.
4. What was your initial training and/or onboarding experience with the Virginia Department of Social Services?
  - a. Probe: What specific training topics were you offered?
  - b. Probe: What training topics do you wish you had been offered?
5. Tell me about the ongoing training that is offered to you by the Virginia Department of Social Services.
  - a. Probe: What specific training topics were you offered?
  - b. Probe: What training topics do you wish you had been offered?
6. Are you aware of Virginia's anti-discrimination law?
7. If so please explain.
  - a. Probe: How does it apply to foster youth?
8. Tell me about your experience working with LGBTQ foster youth.
  - a. Probe: What barriers, if any, have you experienced?
9. How, if at all, does your training impact your work with LGBTQ foster youth?
  - a. Probe: What is working?
  - b. Probe: What isn't working?
10. What existing supports do child welfare workers have when working with LGBTQ foster youth?

- a. Probe: What additional resources are needed?

Micro Level:

1. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does Virginia's anti-discrimination law have on your work with LGBTQ foster youth?
2. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does your training have on your work with LGBTQ foster youth?
3. What additional resources, if any, do you need for working with LGBTQ foster youth?

Meso Level:

1. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does Virginia's anti-discrimination law have on your local Department of Social Services work with LGBTQ foster youth?
2. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does training have on your local Department of Social Services' ability to work with LGBTQ foster youth?
3. What additional resources, if any, does your local department of social services need to work with LGBTQ foster youth?

Macro Level:

1. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does Virginia's anti-discrimination law have on child welfare workers in Virginia?
2. In your opinion, what impact, if any, does the training offered have on child welfare workers in the state of Virginia's work with LGBTQ foster youth?
3. What additional resources do all child welfare workers need for working with LGBTQ foster youth?