Chapter 11: 2SLGBTQIA+ Community Centers: A Beacon of Hope

HANDOUT: A History

While members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have been organizing and creating space for themselves and people like them throughout history (cf. Chevat's 2019 "Young People" adaptation of Bronski's A Queer History of the United States), several events in the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed the community to shift from meeting in secret and feeling they needed to hide, to building visible 2SLGBTQIA+ communities across the United States.

One of those events was the Stonewall Riots of 1969, in which members of NYC's 2SLGBTQIA+ community, led predominantly by Black and Brown trans women, fought back against the police brutality and raids that 2SLGBTQIA+ folx were regularly subjected to throughout the 1950s and 1960s (especially following the Red and Lavender Scares, in which suspected communists and 2SLGBTQIA+ folx were targeted as so-called "enemies" of the United States). The refusal of these 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to be further subjected to the police raiding their community gatherings to arrest and brutalize members of their community marked a turning point in which many 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals decided being "out" and visible was their best option for creating lasting change for the conditions of 2SLGBTQIA+ people across the United States. As part of this drive to increase visibility, on the one year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, 2SLGBTQIA+ folx gathered in NYC to commemorate the event by holding the first ever 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride March in the United States.

These events, along with the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness in the early 1970s paved the way for 2SLGBTQIA+ folx to begin creating visible communities across the United States, especially in urban areas along the eastern and western coastal regions. This period marked the founding of the very first 2SLGBTQIA+ community centers in the United States, one in Albany, New York and the other in Los Angeles, California (Centerlink, n.d.).

These centers were eventually followed by 2SLGBTQIA+ community centers in San Diego, Chicago, Salt Lake City, and Atlanta and by the late 1970s over 1,000 LGBTQ+ centers had emerged (Martos et al., 2017). These 2SLGBTQIA+ centers began as meeting sites for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, adults, and elders to come together and meet other people like them,

sometimes for the very first time in their lives. The centers also served as community centers to hold events in service of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (like alternative proms for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth), disseminate information to and about the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, plan annual Pride demonstrations and events, hold support groups, and engage in advocacy efforts for 2SLGBTQIA+ folx in the community.

With the onset of the AIDS/HIV epidemic in the 1980s, to which the United States government was slow to respond, LGBTQ+ community centers began expanding their operations to include other services that would provide aid to those impacted by the epidemic. These services included medical (e.g., testing, treatment, hospice care), education (e.g., sexual health and HIV prevention), and social services (e.g., housing services for displaced individuals).

Today, 2SLGBTQIA+ centers continue to provide all of these services and more to the communities they serve. While the LGBTQ+ community has not always been inclusive to transgender and BIPOC 2SLGBTQIA+ folx, the last 10-20 years has also seen a shift in 2SLGBTQIA+ centers providing more resources to these communities in the form of access to trans-affirming medical services and education, affinity groups for BIPOC 2SLGBTQIA+ people, dual language programs, and services for LGBTQ+ refugees from other countries, among others. To many 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and others in the community, LGBTQ+ community centers have become a lifeline or “a beacon of hope” (Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center, 2021).

Jigsaw Activity

Every LGBTQ+ community center offers a unique combination of services to meet the needs of 2SLGBTQIA local communities. Below are videos from six LGBTQ+ community centers across the United States describing the services they provide to their community.

Circle the video you have been assigned for your “expert group” and use that video to answer the questions under the “expert group” heading.

Videos:

A: Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center; Allentown, PA
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZKWB_VL0Ac

B: The Center; New York City, NY
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36EmFxbvme8

C: First City Pride Center; Savannah, GA
Video: https://youtu.be/i_JLrd9ap1s

D: Milwaukee LGBT Center; Milwaukee, WI
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otd_IOgk9M4

E: The Montrose Center; Houston, TX
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_w-AS5aZkPI

F: Los Angeles LGBT Center; Los Angeles, CA
Video: https://youtu.be/ZMJtSj3aSoI

Expert Group Questions

Directions: Answer the questions below in your expert groups.

1. Where is the 2SLGBTQIA+ community center from your video located?
2. What services does the center provide to the community?
3. Did the video describe any services that attended to specific subsets of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (e.g., BIPOC, transgender folx, refugees, disability)?
4. What impact have those services had on the community members (some videos will have this, some may not)?
5. What surprised you, if anything?
6. Is there anything else your expert group discussed that you think you should share with your home group?

Home Group Questions

Directions: In your home groups, each group member should provide a summary of the discussion that took place in their expert groups. Use group member summaries to answer the questions below.

1. Were there any services that all of the centers provided?

2. Were there any services that were unique to a center?

3. A community asset is defined as “anything [or anyone] that can be used to improve the quality of community life” (Berkowitz & Wadud, n.d., para. 4). By this definition, would 2SLGBTQIA+ community centers be considered a community asset? Why or why not?

4. In your home group, think about community centers you have personally visited in your home town or city (for example, the YMCA, the local Boys and Girls Club, the library, or even your own local LGBTQ+ center). How are the assets that the 2SLGBTQIA+ community centers offer similar to those of those other community centers? How do they differ?

Handout References:

Berkowitz, B. & Wadud, E. (n.d.) Section 8: Identifying community Assets and resources.” Community Tool Box. https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/identify-community-assets/main

Bronski, M. (2019). A queer history of the United States for young people (Vol. 1). Adaptation by Richie Chevat. Beacon Press.

CenterLink. (n.d.). History of the community center movement. CenterLink. https://www.lgbtcenters.org/AboutUs/History

Martos, A.J., Wilson, P.A., & Meyer, I.H. (2017). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) health services in the United States: Origins, evolution, and contemporary landscape. PloS one 12(7), e0180544.