



A Brief Introduction

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MISSION AND VISION

Mission:

The Electronic Gay Youth Center provides a cohesive support network to address the unique needs of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning youth.

Primarily using the Internet and working with professional mental health organizations, government, educational institutions and fellow non-profits, the Electronic Gay Youth Center is in the unique position of providing information, peer support resources, and an avenue to access professional help regardless of geographical region.

The Electronic Gay Youth Center is dedicated to embracing diversity and providing a non-judgmental environment for youth as well as working with existing organizations to enhance the current infrastructure and foster new innovative programs.

Vision:

The Electronic Gay Youth Center sees a society in which no GLBTQ-Q youth are deprived of an appropriate support system and are not only allowed, but encouraged, to flourish.

Overview of Services

"Filling in the Gaps"

The Electronic Gay Youth Center approaches the issues facing GLBTQ-Q youth using a Two-Prong approach. The EGYC provides a wide variety of information and support services to Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Queer and Questioning youth as well as provides information, data and a professional network to help current youth-focused organizations become more efficient and self-sufficient.

Youth-Focused Information and Services

Information

The Electronic Gay Youth Center provides unbiased information on a wide variety of topics. Some examples include:

- Sexual Preference
- Self-discovery
- "Coming out"
- Religion
- Cultural views of GLBTQ people

Peer opinions about the information provided (e.g., How Do I Know I'm Gay?) are included throughout the content to help the youth thoroughly understand the topics. In addition, information provided is linked with corresponding message boards.

Youth feedback and demand both shape the growth of the website and plays a large role in deciding what information and/or topics will be expanded on.

Note: Information can be provided in a variety of formats including web pages, streaming video and interactive applications.

Services

All services are designed to treat each youth as an individual, providing personal support and vast resources simultaneously. This is accomplished by using a peer support approach combined with a Two-tier support infrastructure.

Peer Support Approach

Moderated peer support is utilized for a majority of the support services. Using this method empowers youth to take control of their lives and discover themselves without relying on any specific entity to define what they are feeling or their beliefs.

Determining one's sexuality is a hard and lonely road. Peer support plays a vital role simply by providing the access to other youth in similar situations, re-enforcing the fact that they are not alone.

Two-Tier Support Infrastructure

All youth have access to information and are able to interact within the global community using services such as:

Message Boards

Message Boards are broken down by topic and accessible by all youth who have registered with the website. These forums are moderated to prevent abuse.

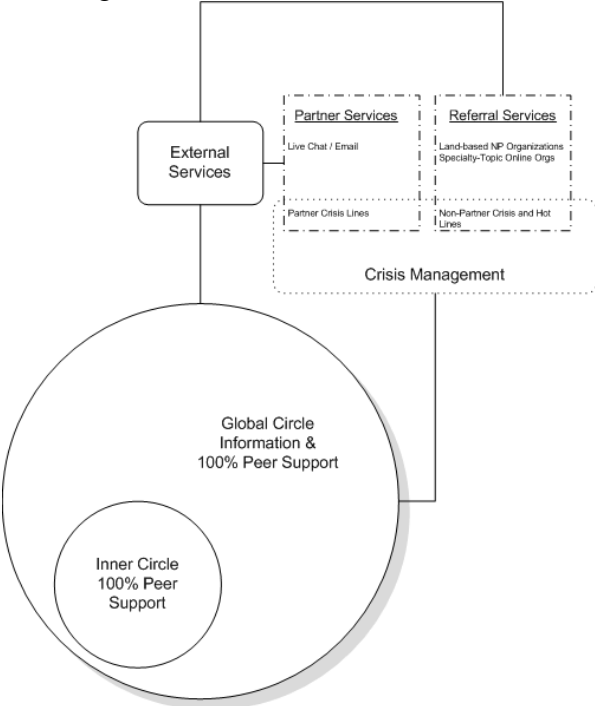
Chat Rooms

Chat Rooms are utilized when a moderator is present or for a special event. A schedule is set for topic-based chats. An inner peer support circle may arrange for a chat room through their Peer Support Leader.

Art Exhibits

The Art Exhibits provides a place for youth to express themselves and present it to their peers. A moderated discussion and commentary on each piece is optionally available.

The EGYC also provides youth with a small group of peers to utilize as a close group of personal support. Each of these groups is assigned a peer support leader to act as a stimulus and moderator for the group. These groups are assigned at random and allow a consistent circle of support.



Organization-Focused Services

Organization-focused services provide organizations with additional resources and information to better serve the GLBTQ-Q community. Some examples of these services are:

InfoExchange

InfoExchange provides organizations and their staff with a platform to exchange information such as program implementation experience and valuable resources.

StatCentral

StatCentral is a large repository of statistics and trends derived by the EGYC or its partner organizations and is available to organizations, helping them to better understand the specific ever-changing needs of GLBTQ-Q youth.

Publications

Informational pamphlets and publications are available to organizations for distribution.

EducationAlliance

Educational materials, teaching aids and multimedia presentations addressing the issue of sexual preference are made available to educators. This service is not exclusive to the EGYC.

Getting Organizations Involved

Online Youth Services recognizes the immense value of the current support system for GLBTQ-Q youth. The Electronic Gay Youth Center helps these organizations to extend their reach, serves as a resource for their clients and helps them more effectively address the populations they serve.

An organization, based on its mission and purpose, is able to participate in a variety of ways.

Provide Preventative Support to Youth

Resource Directory

Youth may search, based on zip code and radius, for organizations. They are provided with a profile of the organization, contact information, and a calendar of events (data based on availability).

Live Chat

Based on their zip code, youth may chat real-time with any organization that serves the area and wishes to participate in this program.

Messaging

Based on their zip code, youth may message organizations with questions.

Topical Chat Room

If an organization specializes in a certain sector, such as a focus in transgendered youth, the organization may jointly organize a “meeting” in a chat room to disperse information and/or have Q&A sessions.

Information

A specialized organization may provide information to be presented on the EGYC web site, pertaining to their field of expertise.

Provide Crisis Support to Youth

Resource Directory

An organization can choose to be included in the Crisis resource Directory. This information is available to youth through a search and is available to peer support volunteers, staff and partner organizations for immediate referral.

YouthConnect

Crisis hotlines can choose to participate in YouthConnect, a way to connect youth to the help they need. Youth may connect to hotlines through two methods, depending on the capabilities of the participating hotlines and the capabilities of the youth’s computer

If the youth’s computer and the chosen hotline both meet the criteria, youth may access the hotline through a Voice-Over-IP connection across the internet. This requires no software to be installed.

If the youth’s computer and/or the chosen hotline does not meet the criteria, the youth may use a toll-free 800 number to be patched through to the hotline.

Organizations partnered with Online Youth Services and participating in the Electronic Gay Youth Center report and exchange statistics on regular intervals. This information is used to customize the services for a particular geographic area or subset of the population.

Getting Youth Involved

The Electronic Gay Youth Center focuses a majority of its services on peer support and makes every effort to provide an atmosphere conducive to open peer-based learning and support.

To help facilitate this peer-based community, the EGYC offers youth the opportunity to volunteer on a casual or more formal basis.

Casual Volunteers

Youth who express interest in volunteering for the EGYC can do so by encouraging discussion among the youth on the website, previewing and testing new web pages and services before deployment, and outreaching to youth online.

Formal Volunteers

Youth who wish to volunteer on a formal basis can participate in various ways.

Peer Support Leader

Peer Support Leaders are trained in crisis identification and are assigned to a peer support group to be a stimulus for continued peer support and to identify crisis situations.

Moderator

Moderators are responsible for monitoring the message boards and email lists available to youth.

Content Contributor

Content contributors are responsible for sections of website content. All documents and/or changes are submitted and approved by the content approval board.

Youth Advisory Board Member

Youth advisory board members are volunteers act as the voice of the youth to provide feedback to the EGYC Senior Leadership Team.

The Web Site

The Electronic Gay Youth Center website (<http://www.egyc.org/>) is the central hub for all of the activities of the EGYC and acts as a portal to access support. The website content is completely dynamic and constantly changing.

Support service information, content structure and layout are based on a combination of variables including the user's preferences and location. This functionality allows the EGYC to tailor the experience and proactively address topics based on trends in locales or any number of different factors. This information ranges from the population in an area to specific problems in a given region. The EGYC works with organizations and youth nationwide to stay current and focused on the issues that matter.

The content on the EGYC web site is provided by staff, youth volunteers and partner organizations and is approved by a review committee before becoming publicly available. Outside organizations are occasionally invited to publish information on specific topics

This information may not apply to supporting web sites, such as <http://parents.egyc.org/>, which may be managed in a different manner.

Why the Internet?

Utilizing the internet enables the Electronic Gay Youth Center to reach all youth, regardless of their location. In many areas, there is not enough community support for land-based organizations or public-funded programs. These youth either do not have adequate access to information and support or have to travel long distances to find the resources they require.

Land-based organizations that do exist in these areas are over-burdened and understaffed. Using the internet allows Online Youth Services to assist these organizations and provide an alternative source of information and support. A large percentage of questioning youth would not use a land-based organization in fear of being labeled. This is especially true in rural areas and small communities, where the support is needed the most. The internet enables youth to seek information or support in the privacy of their home, without risk.

The internet provides a low-cost method of reaching the youth who need the most support and does so in a fashion which is conducive to improving the quality of life.

Ensuring Quality

The Electronic Gay Youth Center program is encompassed in the Online Youth Services Quality Management System (QMS). The QMS is a policy-deployment system in which all processes are documented, monitored and measured for quality, consistency and constant improvement.

Program Quality

Overall Program

The overall program “health” and quality is reviewed on a monthly basis by the EGYC Senior Leadership Team and quarterly by the Online Youth Services Board of Directors. This allows the EGYC to review the organizational focus and ensure the services are aligned with changing needs of youth.

Some examples of areas that are monitored are:

Volunteers

All volunteer actions are passively monitored by staff and non-youth volunteers. Availability and activity statistics ensure the optimal number of volunteers exists, that the volunteers are given the opportunity to grow, and the best possible service is provided to youth.

Participating Organizations

Organizations participating in the Electronic Gay Youth Center participate in a review process. The reviews are done as-needed, with a maximum interval of 6 months between reviews.

These reviews allow the EGYC and a partner organization to refine the quality of the services exchanged and provides an opportunity for the EGYC to properly evaluate the performance of the current infrastructure.

Youth Feedback

Youth feedback is obtained in many ways, including polls and feedback forms. Information obtained is reviewed weekly and monthly to address concerns, requests and complaints about the EGYC.

Infrastructure

Security, efficiency and resources are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure the best experience for youth utilizing the EGYC.

Isn't the Internet Dangerous?

The internet is a great tool when utilized correctly, but it can be a trap for unsuspecting youth. The Electronic Gay Youth Center has addressed this issue with a combination of extensive technical defenses and business processes built to protect youth.

The EGYC has designed its services to take into consideration malicious individuals seeking to take advantage of children under the auspices of anonymity. Consequently, youth cannot hold private conversations with other youth via the EGYC web site.

Personal information is stored in a "1-way repository" and is secured by a 2-person password. For personal information to be accessed, the Executive Director and/or Board of Directors President in addition to an authorized staff member must be present and authorize the transaction. Should a youth's account be compromised, information stored in this repository is not available for viewing.

One technical staff member is assigned to the repository and possesses limited access to this resource.

Technical Overview

Due to the overwhelming response to the Electronic Gay Youth Center, it is projected that the web site will have actively served over 35,000 youth and 500 organizations, utilizing 400 volunteers by the fourth quarter of 2005.

Online Youth Services utilizes state-of-the-art technologies and cutting edge methodologies to manage the large volume of traffic and to ensure reliability and security.

Reliability

The Electronic Gay Youth Center implements redundancy throughout the network infrastructure. From multiple redundant high-speed connections to redundant server

components, the EGYC is safeguarded against multiple points of failure, providing 99.99% uptime.

Security

The Electronic Gay Youth Center considers security and information privacy the highest priority. Several methods, not outlined here for security purposes, are implemented to prevent would-be attackers from ever having the chance to compromise the network. These methods, combined with 24x7 monitoring, ensure the integrity of the network.

How Does It Work?

The Electronic Gay Youth Center is run by four “groups” of equipment, each with their own specialized purpose.

Network Communications Equipment

Network Communications Equipment acts as a traffic officer and routes the communications and information as is appropriate. As well, this equipment is the first line of defense against intruders and unauthorized users.

Database Servers

Database servers hold all of the data used by the EGYC Web Site, ranging from simple content to complex service-specific information.

Application Servers

Application Servers present the web pages and make decisions related to design, content and presentation of the information. These machines handle the majority of the workload generated from users on the website.

Other Servers

Multiple servers handle security, information backup, statistics, communications (email, Crisis VoIP, Crisis 800#, etc.) as well as various maintenance tasks.

Other OYS Programs

The Electronic Gay Youth Center is part of a portfolio of programs currently offered by Online Youth Services or under development by Online Youth Services. The EGYC may leverage the information or assets of another program.

- TransgenderedYouth
- HIVaware.com
- AIDS Education Network
- YouthVote
- ABNet
- RealLifeAIDS

Related Statistics

- Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth were more than four times as likely to report being threatened with a weapon on school property.ⁱ
- Harassed youth are more than four times as likely to report having made a serious enough suicide attempt to have been treated by a doctor or nurse.ⁱⁱ
- 99.4% of LGBTQ youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from other studentsⁱⁱⁱ
- Between 19% and 29% of the adolescent population have a lifetime history of suicidal ideation, and between 7% and 14% report ever having attempted suicide.^{iv}

ⁱ 1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance

ⁱⁱ Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

ⁱⁱⁱ 1999 National School Climate Survey (New York: GLSEN, 1999)

^{iv} Am J Public Health. 2001;91:1276-1281