

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues

This represents a revision of the 1996 Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues Policy.

Authors:

Catherine Crisp, PhD, MSW
School of Social Welfare
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66044
E-mail: ccrisp@ku.edu
Phone: (785) 864-2367
Fax: (785) 864-5277

Yolanda Padilla, PhD, MSW
University of Texas at Austin
School of Social Work
1 University Station D3500
Austin, TX 78712
E-mail: ypadilla@mail.utexas.edu
Phone: (512) 471-6266
Fax: (512) 471-9600

Abstract:

NASW believes that same-gender sexual orientation should be afforded the same respect and rights as other-gender orientation and that social workers have the responsibility to clients to explain the prevailing knowledge about sexual orientation and the lack of data supporting reparative therapy. Furthermore, NASW is committed to working toward the elimination of prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation, both inside and outside of the profession.

In social work education and the professional environment, NASW expects that schools of social work to address the issue of discrimination in conjunction with the Council on Social Work Education. Furthermore, NASW encourages continuing education programs on practice and policy issues relevant to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and cultures, as well as education about human sexuality. In addition, NASW strongly supports all social work organizations and

34 associations in the use of inclusive, gender-neutral language and inclusion of questions specific
35 to lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues on social work licensing exams.

36 In coalition with mental health and other human services professions, NASW is working to
37 help enact antidiscrimination legislation at the national, state, and local levels as well. NASW
38 actively campaigns against laws that allow discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual
39 people, primarily in immigration, employment, housing, professional credentialing, licensing,
40 public accommodation, child custody, and the right to marry. NASW encourages the adoption of
41 laws that recognize inheritance, insurance, same-sex marriage, child custody, property, and other
42 rights in lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships.

43 **RATIONALE**

44 Although progress continues to be made, discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB)
45 individuals remains a significant problem. Therefore, it is important that NASW take a strong
46 stance on behalf of members of this group and work to end the prejudice, oppression, and
47 discrimination that GLB people are confronted with on a daily basis.

48 This policy has been revised to **reflect** the legal, legislative, attitudinal, and policy changes
49 that have occurred since the last policy was written. Among the most significant of these was the
50 June 26, 2003, decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* that sodomy laws were unconstitutional. Following
51 this decision, great strides have been made with the legalization of marriage in the state of
52 Massachusetts and the decision by several municipalities across the country to perform same-sex
53 marriages despite being told that these weddings would not be recognized by the states in which
54 they were performed. Regrettably, the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision was ~~also~~ followed by an
55 increase in violence against GLB individuals and a proposal to amend the U.S. Constitution to
56 prohibit two people of the same gender from marrying each other, an amendment supported by
57 President Bush and in direct contradiction to the Republican party's history of letting the states
58 decide matters of this nature.

59 Given the rapidly changing political and social climate, it is important that NASW and social
60 workers across the country take a strong stand against discrimination of GLB individuals in all
61 forms. It is also important that NASW encourage social workers to practice, advocate, and
62 educate clients and other constituent groups about the needs of GLB individuals. Anything less is
63 a disservice to all oppressed groups.

64 **BACKGROUND**

65

66 **Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues**

67 On June 26, 2003, one day before the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots that marked the
68 beginning of the gay rights movement, the Supreme Court ruled in a six to three decision in
69 *Lawrence v. State of Texas* (2003) that sodomy laws were unconstitutional. This historic ruling
70 struck down the Texas “Homosexual Conduct Law,” which criminalized private consensual
71 behavior between two people of the same sex. In doing so, the Supreme Court overturned their
72 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), which found that there was no constitutionally
73 protected right to engage in private consensual sex between two adults of the same sex;
74 simultaneously negating laws in 13 states that prohibited consensual sex between adults of the
75 same gender (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2003). This decision was supported by the
76 National Association of Social Workers (NASW) who, with the American Psychological
77 Association and the American Psychiatric Association, filed an amicus curiae brief that
78 supported the petitioners (NASW, 2003).

79 Regrettably, this landmark decision was followed by an increase in hate crimes against GLB
80 individuals across the country (Anti-Violence Project, 2004) and by a proposal to amend the
81 constitution to prohibit marriage between two people of the same gender, which was publicly
82 endorsed by President George W. Bush. The Federal Marriage Amendment (H. J. Res. 56), and a
83 similar measure in the Senate (S.J. Res. 26), would specifically limit marriage to a man and a
84 woman. If passed, this amendment would be the first amendment in the history of the U.S.
85 Constitution to **deny** rights to a group of people rather than expand them. The U.S. inertia toward
86 the advancement of gay rights continues to occur in the face of significant breakthroughs in other
87 industrialized countries, including the legalization of same-sex marriage in The Netherlands,
88 Belgium, and Canada (Bayles & Stone, 2004).

89 Although *Lawrence v. Texas* and the Federal Marriage Amendment address important civil
90 rights issues affecting all Americans, it remains unclear just how many gay, lesbian, and bisexual
91 individuals there are and are thus affected by these measures. The frequently cited estimate that
92 10 percent of the population can be classified as gay or lesbian is based on the well known
93 Kinsey studies (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953),
94 however, these figures are considered inflated by many researchers. Among the many challenges
95 in identifying the prevalence of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons are difficulties in identifying
96 who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual and concerns by those who are about disclosing their behavior
97 and/or identity. An analysis by Michaels (1996) of large-scale national studies may provide more
98 accurate estimates of homosexuality in the United States: 9.8 percent of men and 5 percent of
99 women report same-gender sexual behavior since puberty; 7.7 percent of men and 7.5 percent of
100 women report same-gender desire; and 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women report a
101 gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. Michaels noted that the prevalence varies by several factors
102 including gender, age, marital status, education, religion and religious attendance, race, and
103 “relative urbanization of place of residence” (p. 61). Estimating the percent of people who are
104 bisexual is also fraught with difficulty. Researchers have been reluctant to view bisexuals as a
105 separate group, worthy of study independent of gays and lesbians (Crisp & DiNitto, 2003) and
106 consequently, little is known about the prevalence of bisexuality. Whatever the actual percent of
107 the population who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, social workers should be committed to
108 ending prejudice and discrimination against GLB individuals and to practicing in ways that
109 affirm their identities as GLB individuals (Davies, 1996).

110 An increasing body of research suggests that sexual orientation is biologically predetermined
111 and not a voluntary choice. Researchers have found familial patterns and biological correlates of

112 adult homosexual orientation, suggesting that genetic, congenital, or anatomical factors may
113 contribute to its development (Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, & Pattatuci,
114 1993; LeVay, 1991, 1993; Turner, 1995). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity, however, is more
115 complex than behaviors or biology and includes aspects of ethnicity, culture, race, and class as
116 equally important aspects of an individual's core personal identity. Groups within the lesbian,
117 gay, and bisexual population, including youths, older people, people with disabilities, and rural
118 populations, may have additional vulnerabilities (Gonsiorek, 1993; Kanuha, 1990; Kimmel,
119 1993; Kurdek, 1994; Kus, 1995; Renzetti & Miley, 1996; Strickland, 1995).

120 The research and clinical experience of the American Psychiatric Association, the American
121 Psychological Association, and NASW members indicate that, once established, sexual
122 orientation is resistant to change. There is little evidence that treatment actually changes sexual
123 attractions, as opposed to reducing or eliminating same-sex sexual behavior. There is no reliable
124 evidence that "sexual orientation is amenable to redirection or significant influence from
125 psychological intervention" (Haldeman, 1994, p. x). As noted in a position statement on this
126 issue, NASW is opposed to any form of treatment that attempts to change the sexual orientation
127 of any individual (NASW, 2000b). Given that sexual orientation can and should not be changed,
128 it is critical that social workers are culturally competent in their practice with gay, lesbian, and
129 bisexual individuals, a position affirmed by the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in*
130 *Social Work Practice* (2001).

131 **ISSUE STATEMENT**

132 Despite clear mandates by the NASW (2000a) that discrimination on the basis of sexual
133 orientation is antithetical to social work values, social workers continue to demonstrate varying
134 degrees of homophobia (the fear or hatred of homosexuality) or heterosexism (a bias against

135 nonheterosexuals based on the belief in the superiority of heterosexuality). There is concern that
136 practitioners who hold homophobic or heterosexist views may be ill and heterosexism in social
137 workers may reduce the effectiveness of treatment offered to gay and lesbian clients and lead
138 social workers

- 139 • to minimize or exaggerate the importance of sexual orientation in the gay, lesbian, or
140 bisexual individual's life
- 141 • to change the topic when gay, lesbian, or bisexual issues are discussed
- 142 • to devalue clients' feelings and experiences
- 143 • to deny clients access to a broad range of experiences, including gay, lesbian, and
144 bisexual experiences; view clients strictly in terms of their sexual behavior
- 145 • to assume celibate people and adolescents cannot identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual
- 146 • to advise clients that they are not gay, lesbian, or bisexual because they fail to meet some
147 arbitrarily defined criterion
- 148 • to assume that gay, lesbian, or bisexual relationships are temporary and simply a phase
149 clients will move through
- 150 • to perpetuate self hatred experienced by some gay and lesbian clients (Brown, 1996;
151 McHenry & Johnson, 1993; Messing, Schoenberg, & Stephens, 1984; Peterson, 1996).

152 Taken to the extreme, homophobia in social workers and other practitioners can lead to the use
153 of conversion or reparative therapies, which are explicitly condemned by the NASW, the
154 American Psychological Association (APA), the American Counseling Association (ACA), and
155 the American Psychiatric Association (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., n.d.; American
156 Psychiatric Association, 1998; NASW, 2000b). It is thus important that social workers be

157 mindful of the many consequences of homophobia in their practice with gay, lesbian, and
158 bisexual clients and act in ways that are consistent with the *Code of Ethics*.

159 **POLICY STATEMENT**

160 It is the position of the NASW that same-gender sexual orientation should be afforded the same
161 respect and rights as other-gender orientation. Discrimination and prejudice directed against any
162 group are damaging to the social, emotional, and economic well-being of the affected group and
163 of society as a whole. NASW is committed to advancing policies and practices that will improve
164 the status and well-being of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

165 Discriminatory statutes, policies, and actions that diminish the quality of life for lesbian, gay,
166 and bisexual people and that force many to live their lives in secrecy should be prevented and
167 eliminated. NASW supports the right of the individual to self-disclosed sexual orientation and
168 encourages the development of supportive practice environments for lesbian, gay, and bisexual
169 clients and colleagues (Appleby & Anastas, 1992; Berger, 1995; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995;
170 DeCrescenzo, 1994; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Gonsiorek, 1993; Hidalgo, Peterson, &
171 Woodman, 1985; Moses & Hawkins, 1982; Quam, 1996; Shernoff, 1996; Woodman, 1992). The
172 rights and well-being of the children of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people should be an integral
173 part of all these considerations.

174 NASW affirms its commitment to work toward full social and legal acceptance and
175 recognition of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (Jones & Kosher, 1995; Nava & Dawidoff,
176 1994; Shower, 1995; Stein, 1994; Sullivan, 1995; Vaid, 1995). To this end, NASW supports
177 legislation, regulations, policies, judicial review, political action, and changes in social work
178 policy statements and the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2000a) and any other means necessary to
179 establish and protect the rights of all people without regard to sexual orientation. NASW is

180 committed to working toward the elimination of prejudice and discrimination both inside and
181 outside the profession.

182 Social Work Education and the Professional Environment

- 183 ■ NASW supports curriculum policies in schools of social work that eliminate discrimination
184 against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. In conjunction with the Council on Social Work
185 Education, schools of social work are expected to address the issue of discrimination; to
186 articulate the NASW position in curriculum policy and standards; to require content on
187 lesbian, gay, and bisexual cultures and concerns (Gunter, 1992; Lee, 1992) throughout the
188 curriculum, in field instruction, in continuing education programs, and in research activities;
189 and to provide training for classroom instructors, field supervisors, and field advisors
190 regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues (Goodman, 1985).
- 191 ■ NASW aims to increase awareness within the profession of oppression, heterosexism, and
192 internalized homophobia (Appleby, 1995; Garfinke & Morin, 1995; Peterson, 1996; Walters
193 & Simoni, 1993). In particular, NASW is concerned with increasing awareness of the multiple
194 dilemmas and stigmas that lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients and social workers of color
195 experience (Hidalgo, 1995; Lloyd & Kuszelewicz, 1995; Longres, 1996; Shernoff, 1996).
- 196 ■ NASW strongly supports all social work organizations and associations in their use of
197 inclusive, gender-neutral language and their inclusion of questions specific to lesbian, gay,
198 and bisexual issues in social work licensing exams.

199 Antidiscrimination

- 200 ■ NASW strives for full representation and establishment of means to affirm the presence of
201 lesbian, gay, and bisexual people at all levels of leadership and employment in social work
202 and in NASW and its chapters.

- 203 ▪ NASW supports all social agencies, universities, professional associations, and funding
204 organizations in their efforts to broaden statements of nondiscrimination to include sexual
205 orientation.
- 206 ▪ NASW works in coalition with mental health and other human services professions to help
207 enact antidiscrimination legislation at national, state, and local levels and actively campaigns
208 against any laws allowing discriminatory practices against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people,
209 primarily in immigration, employment, housing, professional credentialing, licensing, public
210 accommodation, child custody, and the right to marry (NASW, 1996).
- 211 ▪ NASW opposes policies that exclude lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from the military and
212 other forms of government service.
- 213 ▪ NASW supports efforts to end discrimination and harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual,
214 transgender youth in public schools.

215 Public Awareness

- 216 ▪ NASW supports the development of programs to increase public awareness of the
217 discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and of the contributions to
218 society made by lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.
- 219 ▪ NASW encourages the development of programs, training, and information that promote
220 proactive efforts to end the physical and psychological violence aimed at lesbian, gay, and
221 bisexual people.
- 222 ▪ NASW supports organizations that fund, develop, and provide programming that accurately
223 portrays the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities compassionately and accurately.

224 Health and Mental Health Services

- 225 ▪ NASW endorses policies in both the public and private sectors that ensure nondiscrimination;

226 that are sensitive to all the health and mental health needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual
227 people; and that promote an understanding of lesbian, gay, and bisexual cultures. Social
228 stigmatization of lesbian, gay and bisexual people is widespread and is a primary motivating
229 factor in leading some people to seek sexual orientation changes (Haldeman, 1994). It is
230 against the NASW *Code of Ethics* for social workers to provide treatments designed to change
231 sexual orientation or to refer practitioners or programs that claim to do so (NASW, 2000a).

- 232 ■ NASW strongly advocates for the availability of culturally appropriate comprehensive
233 psychological and social support services for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and their
234 families (Diggs, 1993; Haldeman, 1994; Lloyd, 1992). NASW recognizes the increasing
235 number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who are making reproductive choices, and it
236 strives to establish legal, medical, and psychological supports for these families through its
237 constituencies (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Patterson, 1994).
- 238 ■ NASW continues to advocate for the implementation of programs that address all the health
239 and mental health needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people across the life span, including
240 HIV prevention, psychological stress and dysfunction prevention and treatment, and suicide
241 prevention.

242 Legal and Political Action

- 243 ■ It is important for NASW and its chapters to develop and participate in coalitions with other
244 professional associations to lobby for the civil rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and
245 other oppressed groups; to defeat efforts to limit the civil rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual
246 people; and to advocate for increased funding for programs designed to eliminate hate crimes
247 and antigay violence and to provide education, treatment services, and research that increases
248 our understanding of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community (Rofes, 1996).

- 249 ▪ NASW supports working toward implementation of marriage legislation at local, state, and
250 national levels that includes lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. It recognizes that domestic
251 partnership is inadequate, given that as many as 1,138 rights that are available to married
252 heterosexual couples are denied same-sex families.
- 253 ▪ NASW encourages adoption of laws that recognize inheritance, insurance, same-sex marriage,
254 child custody, and property, among other rights in lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships
255 (Tully, 1994).
- 256 ▪ NASW encourages self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals to seek election in all
257 political jurisdictions (NASW, 1996).

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