

# Fairness WV aims to train health care providers to better serve transgender people

- By Lori Kersey Staff writer
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When organizers at Fairness West Virginia hosted events designed to teach communities about transgender people, they noticed a theme.

Several transgender people who answered questions during the “Topsy Trans 101” events held in bars in a handful of West Virginia cities told stories of the difficulty they had visiting health care providers in the Mountain State, said Billy Wolfe, a communications specialist for Fairness West Virginia.

Transgender people faced problems accessing not only trans-related health care like cross-sex hormones, but routine health care.

“When you go to the doctor for a sinus issue, they don’t need to inspect your genitals,” said Natasha Stone, a field organizer for Fairness West Virginia. “That’s not a thing that needs to happen, and that does happen. That’s a thing that multiple people have said they’ve been subjected to — genitalia examinations for completely unrelated things because they’re trans.”

Wolfe said he heard other shocking stories. In one, a doctor claimed to be an ally of the LGBTQ community but then asked a transgender person all kinds of invasive questions.

“I remember one person saying that their doctor said that ‘you can’t be trans because you’re not gay,’” Wolfe said. “Gender identity and sexual orientation are two totally separate things.”

The stories Fairness West Virginia heard during the events in part led the organization to start an initiative to train medical and mental health providers around the state.

As a part of the Transgender Health Initiative, the organization will also survey transgender people around the state about their experiences with health care providers.

Any trans-identifying person in the state is asked to fill out the survey. As an incentive, they’ll be entered to win gift cards. The online survey is on [Fairness West Virginia’s website](#).

By the end of the year, the organization plans to publish a guide of health care providers in the state who have completed the training.

The initiative is funded in part with a grant from the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation and supporters of Fairness West Virginia.

Stone, who is conducting the training, said her role is not training doctors on medical procedures and prescribing, though the organization can connect health care providers with training for that.

“Essentially what I’m teaching them is awareness and sensitivity training,” she said.

The training sessions are for the entire staff, from the doctors to the janitorial staff, she said.

“Because the thing is, when you go to the doctor, the doctor is in their office in the back,” Stone said. “You might have a bad experience that makes you not want to go to this doctor anymore before you ever get to the doctor. So it can’t just be the doctor that’s trained, it’s got to be the entire staff.”

For instance, the clinic’s front desk staff can unintentionally out a transgender woman by calling her “mister” in front of others in the waiting room, Wolfe said.

One way to signal to transgender people that they're welcome and the clinic is a safe space is to post trans-friendly stickers, Wolfe said. The organization can provide the stickers, he said.

Wolfe said he hopes the guide will also include which doctors provide trans-related care, like therapy for gender dysphoria and cross-sex hormones.

Danielle Stewart, a transgender woman who serves on the Fairness West Virginia board, said such a guide would have been helpful while she was going through her transition.

The Beckley resident had retired after 23 years in the Army, but didn't want to go through the Veterans Administration for cross-sex hormones and surgery during her transition.

She started looking for a mental health provider and doctor in West Virginia who was willing and experienced in treating transgender people. That proved to be more difficult than she thought.

"Especially in Southern West Virginia and what I've heard in most other places as well is you just know there are physicians here and mental health providers that will treat you, but nobody advertises it and nobody makes it known they're willing to do it," Stewart said.

Stewart said she tried for a year to find health care in West Virginia, but ended up going to a VA clinic in Washington D.C. for hormones and to Charlotte, North Carolina, for surgery.

[According to a 2017 study](#), West Virginia has the highest percentage of teens who identify as transgender in the United States. But West Virginia doesn't have the same ranking for the number of transgender adults, which suggests that somewhere along the line transgender people are leaving the state, Wolfe said.

The outward migration of transgender people is something the organization hopes to address, Wolfe said.

Fairness West Virginia estimates there are 60,000 LGBTQ people in West Virginia, Stone said. LGBTQ people generally are more likely to be affected by sexual violence and poor health care, she said.

Stone said she tells providers that if LGBTQ people aren't accessing their services, that's probably because the providers are doing something wrong.

"Because they're here, they exist and they need these services," Stone said. "Especially doctors. Everyone has to go to the doctor."

For questions about LGBTQ awareness training, contact Stone at [natasha@fairnesswv.org](mailto:natasha@fairnesswv.org) or 681-265-9064.