



## **Community Engagement: Understanding the GLBT Community Experience with Discrimination**

### **Background:**

In Spring 2007, JCCI *Forward* completed an issue forum titled, *Out in Jacksonville: The Status and Impact of Our GLBT Community*. That issue forum brought together 44 residents of Jacksonville to hear presentations by expert resource speakers and discuss the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) residents in Jacksonville. Participants in that discussion were diverse in age, sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Forum members discussed what was known about the number of GLBT residents of Jacksonville, the status of rights and protections for GLBT residents, and issues associated with school and education, work and the workplace, religion and worship, and health and well-being. The forum identified the need for the community to understand the level and frequency of discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, and access to public accommodations.

JCCI set out in Fall 2008 to measure the extent of discrimination against Jacksonville's GLBT residents. The purpose of the project was to answer these questions:

- Does discrimination against GLBT individuals happen in Jacksonville?
- If so, where and in what fashion does that discrimination occur?
- How often do Jacksonville's GLBT residents experience discrimination?

The research focused on discrimination that was local (in Jacksonville), recent (within the past five years), and potentially actionable – the types of discrimination that would be illegal if gender identity and sexual orientation were protected under civil rights legislation in the same ways that race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, marital status, or disability are protected under Florida law or Jacksonville's Human Rights Ordinance. In particular, the research looked at discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations.

In the process, JCCI also heard numerous stories of other types of harassment and mistreatment, from family members, peer networks, faith institutions, strangers, and others. Those stories are not included in this document, but this context of maltreatment and social stressors compounds the impact of discrimination on the lives of Jacksonville's GLBT residents.

### **Methodology:**

JCCI was allowed to add three questions to a survey conducted at the First Coast Pride Festival and the Black Pride Festival. The questions were taken from the *Study of the Quality of Life for Tulsa's Gay,*

*Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Population* conducted by the Community Service Council of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a partner with JCCI in the National Association of Planning Councils.

1. Have you faced discrimination because of your sexual orientation or gender identity during the past five years in Jacksonville?
  
2. If yes, where have you faced discrimination in the past five years? (Check all that apply):
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ My job</li> <li>○ My school</li> <li>○ My place of worship</li> <li>○ My physician's office</li> <li>○ Bank/loan office</li> <li>○ Housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Within GLBT organizations</li> <li>○ Family planning</li> <li>○ Adoption service</li> <li>○ Job interview</li> <li>○ Restaurant</li> <li>○ Hospital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Police/law enforcement</li> <li>○ Court system</li> <li>○ Jail/prison</li> <li>○ Other, please specify:</li> </ul>
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3. Have you experienced any of the following situations related to your sexual orientation or gender identity in the past five years in the Jacksonville area? (Please check all that apply)
  - Physical violence
  - Verbal abuse/threats
  - Bullying/intimidation
  - Teasing/off-color jokes about GLBT people
  - Shunning/isolation
  - Other, please specify:

The surveys, including on-line participants at the *Bridging Out Jacksonville* website, resulted in 306 responses. JCCI filtered those results by zip code to only include those who lived within Duval County, resulting in 235 responses, and then further narrowed the results by those who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The resulting 211 responses represented a diverse mix: 71 percent white, 19 percent black, 7 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent Asian/Native American/Pacific Islander. The respondents identified as 55 percent male, 43 percent female, and 2 percent transgendered. The average age of survey respondents was 35.

JCCI then convened a series of five focus groups (47 total participants) and conducted 18 personal interviews to explore the results of the surveys and learn more about the experiences of discrimination faced by the GLBT community. All participants were promised anonymity for their participation. In addition, JCCI created a blog space on the web for those who wished to share their stories anonymously and were not comfortable speaking in person.

Participant demographics were:

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Transgender</b>
White	14	18	3
Black	18	7	1
Hispanic	1		1
Asian	2	1	

This research was difficult. Many of Jacksonville's GLBT residents were reluctant to talk about experiences of discrimination. This is an area of exploration few communities do, and JCCI was grateful for the guidance and support of Tulsa's Community Service Council in addressing the research questions and for local partners at PFLAG (Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays), JASMYN (Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network), COE (Calendar of Events), Christ Church of Peace, Bridging Out Jacksonville, and others in helping build spaces of trust for the conversations to occur.

## Findings:

### Survey results

Of those GLBT Jacksonville residents who responded to the survey, 41 percent reported having been discriminated against within the past five years in Jacksonville. The responses were consistent by race and ethnicity. Women reported discrimination at higher rates than men, and all transgendered respondents reported being victims of discrimination.

Discrimination was reported most frequently at the place of employment (45 percent of those reporting discrimination were discriminated against at their job) and in job interviews (17 percent). 40 percent reported experiencing discrimination in local restaurants, and 22 percent in school.

Other places where discrimination was experienced included at the physician's office (16 percent) or hospital (10 percent), in housing (9 percent) or at the bank or loan office (8 percent), and in dealing with the police (15 percent) or court system (3 percent).

*If you faced discrimination because of your sexual orientation or gender identity in Jacksonville, where have you faced discrimination in the past five years?*

Location	Percentage Reporting Discrimination
Place of Employment	45%
Job Interviews	17%
Local Restaurants	40%
School	22%
Physician's Office	16%
Hospital	10%
Housing	9%
Bank or Loan Office	8%
Police	15%
Court System	3%

Among the total respondents, 10 reported experiencing physical violence because of their sexual orientation. Twenty-nine reported experiencing bullying, and 60 reported verbal abuse or threats. Ninety-four reported hearing teasing or off-color jokes about sexual orientation or gender identity, and 34 reported experiencing shunning or isolation.

*Have you experienced any of the following situations related to your sexual orientation or gender identity in the past five years in the Jacksonville area?*

Type of Situation	Number Experiencing
Physical Violence	10
Bullying	29
Verbal Abuse or Threats	60
Teasing/Off-color Jokes	94
Shunning or Isolation	34

An additional survey question asked for responses to the statement, "The laws in Jacksonville adequately protect GLBT persons and their families." For the total survey respondents, 15 percent agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared to 56 percent who disagreed or strongly disagreed. (29 percent were unsure.) For those who reported experiencing discrimination, 10 percent thought the laws adequately

protected them (agreed or strongly agreed), while 67 percent did not think the laws were adequate (disagreed or strongly disagreed.)

## ***Employment***

Both in focus groups and in individual interviews many stories about discrimination in employment emerged. The discrimination was sometimes overt, such as in job interviews when people were told they would not be hired because of their orientation, or done more quietly, especially when promotion or other opportunities were denied because of gender identity or sexual orientation.

In the workplace, identified or perceived visual cues about sexual orientation increased the frequency of discrimination. A recurrent theme in employment situations is that GLBT workers are threatened with or have to face false accusations, often losing promotion opportunities or being threatened with termination. Many feel that in order to keep their jobs, they have to hide their orientation/identity. Some spoke of an unwritten “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy in the workforce, mirroring that of one of Jacksonville’s largest employers, the U.S. military. Jacksonville has a number of residents who were forced from the military with a Dishonorable Discharge for Homosexuality; the discharge is public record when the veterans are seeking local employment.

Some examples of the experiences in employment in Jacksonville follow:

### ***Hiring***

- Older gay males said it is difficult to obtain employment. A younger one expressed fear in the face of having to find a job. “It scares me,” he said because “when I reach 18, I have to get a job.”
- A gay man is applying for a job with a friend who wears make-up. The manager does not realize that they are friends. The make-up wearing man fills out an application and leaves. The gay man is filling out an application and is told/asked by the manager, “Do you think I’m going to hire that mess?”
- A gay man who wears make-up is told, “I don’t hire faggots” when asking for an application.

### ***On the job***

- A gay male working in a retail chain store was a new employee when a co-worker stated, “You’re gay.” The co-worker followed with a question: “Are you interested in someone working here?” Three weeks later, the gay man was called into the manager’s office and told that a harassment charge had been brought against him. He was told to sign a document that would go into his file. The gay man asked, “Why do I have to sign it if I did not proposition anyone?” There were three managers in the room, and the gay man felt he would lose his job, so he signed the paper.
- False accusation in the workplace resulted in the accuser getting promoted so that the rest of the team could avoid any more unpleasantness even though the supervisor was prepared to recommend the accused, a bisexual woman.
- A co-worker begins yelling, “That lesbian! I can’t work with that lesbian!”

### ***Termination***

- Television report on a gay event was aired and a lesbian woman’s face appeared in the front row. Her employer recognized her, and she was fired the next day.
- After a recent election, a transgendered individual was forced to resign and not rehired when a newly elected official was overheard saying, “He creeps me out and he has to go.”

## ***Housing***

In the area of housing, focus group respondents as well as those interviewed talked about the difficulty in finding housing. Several told stories of local real estate agents who were unpleasant or uncooperative in

helping them find housing. A local real estate firm that specializes in working with GLBT residents was recommended for GLBT couples who wished to purchase homes in Jacksonville without the hassle.

Other housing discrimination issues involved poor treatment or neglect from property managers or landlords, refusal to renew leases, or threats of eviction.

Some examples of the experiences in housing in Jacksonville follow:

#### *Purchasing a home*

- Two lesbian women relocated from another state. One was working with a local real estate broker to find them a home. They came down for a weekend of showing and at the first home the broker realized that her partner was not a male husband but female partner. The broker showed them only two homes and cancelled the rest, requesting they find a broker who would better understand their particular needs. The women went to lunch and met a waitress whose brother worked at a gay-owned realty, who helped them find a home. If it hadn't been a job transfer both women say the experience would have turned them off of Jacksonville for good.
- A lesbian woman explained, "To avoid some problems, we use people we know" such as realtors, travel agents, and the like.

#### *Landlords and housing associations*

- A gay male leased an apartment from a personal friend. After he told his friend that he was gay, his lease was not renewed.
- A gay male lives in an apartment with his boyfriend. They are constantly being called names by some of the male residents in the complex. They reported the incidents to the leasing office but nothing is ever done about it. He said that he pays his rent on time and doesn't cause any problems, so the leasing office manager hasn't had a reason to bother them. However, it seems that their maintenance requests are not taken care of as quickly as other residents'.
- A gay man rented in a gated community for years but when his child was old enough to join in clubhouse camps and activities, and was being picked up by her two dads, attitudes changed and they were notified that "renting" was not allowed by covenant. Once their daughter stopped attending the events, no one said anything further.

#### **Public Accommodations**

In the area of public accommodations, focus group members and people being interviewed shared a number of stories about facing discrimination. The incidents happened in schools, stores, restaurants, gyms and health clubs, hospitals and doctor's offices, and in libraries, parks, and other public facilities.

For those who pass as straight, there are fewer incidents of harassment. The young men who wear make-up incur the most harassment. Wearing make-up at school, walking on the street, or while riding the bus attracts harassment.

#### *Schools*

- Both parents of gay children and adults who had been students in Duval County spoke of the problems gay children face in the school system, including bullying, fights, and death threats. A number of students left school/dropped out of school out of fear for physical safety. Some obtained a GED, while others struggled without a high school diploma.
- A gay male who wears make-up (brown and gold eye shadow, mascara, blush and lip gloss) is told at the end of the school year by the principal, "You are causing a distraction." The principal sent the youth to the nurse's office, threatened to charge the student with a Class 3 code of conduct violation

and threatened to arrest the student. The student returned to school with make-up on and this time the principal sent the student to in-school suspension for the remainder of the day.

- The most frequent action taken against gay male students who do not “scream straight” is to suspend them. Three males confirmed that the disciplinary action is not documented as “distraction” or “make-up.” It is for more ubiquitous violations such as “not listening.” This is because the student will frequently argue with the administrator and the administrator disciplines them for not listening.
- A principal refused to allow a gay couple to be nominated as best couple during the Senior Superlatives voting.
- Another principal threatened to suspend a student for wearing make-up. His classmates felt this was unfair and the following day so many male and female students attended school wearing make-up that the principal decided not to pursue the suspension of the student.

### *Restaurants*

- While celebrating a friend’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday at a local upscale restaurant a manager came over to ask the ladies to “take it down a notch”. The woman apologized for being too loud, and the manager replied, “if only being loud was the problem.” When the women asked what the problem was, he refused to say anything but offered that other patrons were feeling uncomfortable. Then he refused to serve the cake they had been given approval to bring in and hurried their meals so as to hurry them out.
- At a local restaurant, a group of six diners were asked to leave by the manager because one woman gave her girlfriend a birthday kiss. When the manager was asked about the restaurant policy concerning public displays of affection, the manager refused to answer the question and ordered the group to leave.

### *Stores*

- A transgendered individual (female transitioning into a male) was denied access to the women’s dressing rooms at a local retailer.
- A gay male is followed and harassed at a local retailer, with a sales associate being verbally abusive.

### *Hospitals and Healthcare Providers*

- Several lesbian women reported incidents with health care providers being persistent in taking a pregnancy test even after the provider was told that they were lesbians and had not had a relationship with a man.
- A lesbian woman had an experience where the doctor asked, “so when did you decide you preferred women?”
- A gay male tries to visit his partner of 13 years in the hospital and is refused admittance, and the police come to take him out, threatening to put him in handcuffs.
- Transgendered individuals reported having difficulty getting medical care. For those pre-operational female-to-male transgendered residents who still need pap smears, it is difficult finding a safe home for medical treatment and testing. For those male-to-female transgendered residents who are pre-operational, finding a compassionate healthcare professional is difficult.

### *Libraries, Parks, and Other Public Facilities*

- The security guard at the downtown library follows gay male youth. One youth said, “I’ve stopped going to the library now.” When youth tell the library staff that the security guard is following them, the staff acknowledges it and do not take action.
- A gay man has walked to work through a city park for two years, leaving for work in the early afternoon and returning just after ten each weeknight. He reports being repeatedly harassed by the

police, and has been arrested for trespassing twice (both times dismissed because he wasn't actually in the park but on the sidewalk.)

### *Bathrooms*

- Throughout the conversations in focus groups and interviews, bathrooms emerged as a central trouble point, especially for the transgendered residents of Jacksonville. Along with changing rooms, bathrooms are part of public accommodations that are specifically segregated by gender. Difficulties at places of employment and at universities were reported around bathrooms and seeking accommodation.
- A lesbian woman attends a local health club. In the dressing room, two other women had an open conversation about how the new facility should have 3 changing rooms, one for men, one for women and one for the confused, referring to her. One of the women, an employee, laughed saying, "labeling it dyke room wasn't too pc." When she complained to the manager, he offered to let her change in the men's changing room as a solution.
- Others reported harassment that occurs when visibly-identifiable gay males enter into a bathroom.

### **Conclusions:**

In addition to these experiences, focus group members and interviewees reported being victims of violence because of sexual orientation. A young man is beaten in a city park. Another is accosted at a bus stop. A student drops out of school because star players on the football team have threatened to kill him. Other students refuse to go to the bathroom at school anymore because of repeated beatings that occur there.

One focus group member said, "These are dangerous stories." Focus group members brought up the story of Terriane Sommers, the transgender activist murdered in 2001, as a warning that violence was a threat GLBT people had to live with. One focus group member said, "I could be killed for being gay."

A recurrent thread of fear runs through discussions with GLBT residents about employment, housing, and public accommodations. They fear that discrimination, violence, or loss will occur if people find out who they really are. Some people reported avoiding situations, people, places, or public events where discrimination might occur. Others spoke of being cautious with whom they shared their identity.

However, local institutions have successfully changed their policies to extend human rights protection to GLBT workers. The Duval County Public Schools has included sexual orientation in its employee policies since 1997, and in 2008 added policies protecting GLBT students. Many large employers in Jacksonville protect their GLBT employees with policies that specify sexual orientation. Many urbanized areas in Florida protect their GLBT residents under human rights ordinances, including Fort Lauderdale, Gainesville, Leon County, Miami, Orlando, Palm Beach, St. Petersburg, and Tampa.

The research was conducted to measure the extent of GLBT discrimination in Jacksonville. JCCI found substantive GLBT discrimination exists in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Florida law and Jacksonville ordinances already protect residents in these three areas from discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, marital status, or disability. However, currently Jacksonville's ordinances do not provide protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity for Jacksonville's GLBT citizens. The problem of GLBT discrimination is one of lack of legal protection, not of enforcement of existing laws.