



Imperial Valley Listening Session Report

The #Out4Mental Health Imperial Valley Listening Session was held on Thursday, March 18, 2021 from 6:00 – 8:00 PM via Zoom. Fourteen community members attended. For those who filled out the demographic information, all attendees identified with a sexual orientation along the LGBQ spectrum, and approximately one-third also identified with a gender identity along the Trans spectrum. The ages reported ranged from 14 to 53. Almost all identified Latinx/Latine (Central America, Cuba, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South American) as their race/ethnicity. One person identified as White, and one person identified as both Latinx/Latine and White. All attendees identified English as one of or their only primary language.

Staff from the Imperial Valley Resource Center and #Out4MentalHealth Imperial Valley LGBTQ Task Force introduced themselves and the #Out4MentalHealth project to attendees. The remainder of the Listening Session was facilitated by the #Out4MentalHealth Cultural Broker. Attendees were asked four main questions during the evening:

- What barriers do you, or other LGBTQ people you know, face when trying to get mental health services in the Imperial Valley?
- What is needed in Imperial Valley to improve LGBTQ mental health?
- What is already here that supports LGBTQ mental health?
- Are there new or nontraditional ways Imperial County could use, or fund, to help meet the mental health needs of LGBTQ people living here?

Barriers

Attendees shared that one of their greatest barrier to receiving care is that there are very few local providers who are LGBTQ knowledgeable and affirming. This is particularly true for transgender-related services. Many attendees said they had to travel to San Diego for services, which is a difficult 2-hour drive. The lack of reliable transportation and the cost of traveling to San Diego is a barrier to accessing services. Imperial County lists that most, if not all, of their providers are LGBT-competent, yet that has not been the experience of attendees.

The mental health services we have here in the Valley—there are no gender specialists. Or there are so few gender specialists, or even any doctors willing to deal with any trans-related

healthcare. I had to go to San Diego. ...We don't have anyone who can help me with that locally.
...It's about a two hour drive [to San Diego]

When I reestablished the hormonal care, I did get a little bit of pushback from my primary doctor...So, I went out to San Diego, to the to the Hillcrest clinic out there. ...I met a wonderful doctor there. I basically just laid out my whole story... They were able to reestablish everything, was very smooth. And I was able to get my medication by the next day. So that was very, very good..... Once the [primary] doctor realized that I was gonna get my care over there [Hillcrest], that's when they changed their attitude. And that's when he did not want to lose my business. And out of convenience, I decided to stay with this doctor over here....

I recently needed to get two WPATH letters for a gender affirming surgery... For the secondary letter, I had to rely on somebody from a totally different city. And that's kind of unnerving, because it should ideally be somebody that's close to you and that you can interact with.

It can be a really inconvenient drive as well because of the rapid transition in latitude and it can place a big strain on vehicles. It is normal for vehicles to stop working during the trip.

The wear and tear on vehicles is a hidden cost, for sure.

We have no training [for providers] for LGBT. And I say it very sadly, because the need is there.

Repercussions from Covid-19 also created barriers for providing needed services, especially in-person services and events so important to the mental health and well-being of Imperial Valley (IV) LGBTQ residents.

Covid has really struck us hard in that the [IV LGBT Resource] Center can't have the types of events that we had in the past This would have been perfect weather for Sunday Funday's family get togethers. And we haven't been able to have that. ...The Center had a really good team on Tuesdays that will come for four hours, just to play Dungeons and Dragons. That would get them out of the house, give them a time to have fun, and just communicate with people. Unfortunately, we don't have that right now [due to Covid], but hopefully we can do that again soon.

There are also barriers to accessing online services, as well as other online resources, due to both poor infrastructure and economic barriers.

Ever since I moved out here to this area, to the Valley, I've noticed that my access to the Internet is compromised many times. There's a lot of outages. When I was in Ventura, I had very great

internet that would never go out. And it was available 24/7, you know, very quick. And out here, for weeks on end, I would get mixed signals.

This is a low income community. So ... it's not the same as if the parents have, middle class or higher, ...upper class where they can, or they have one child where they can give an iPhone or a phone to all of their kids and the Internet and all that.

Needs

Attendees spoke about the need for K-12 schools to have a more LGBTQ-affirming environment. They expressed a need for awareness and education to help combat the negative messaging about being LGBTQ that both straight/cisgender and LGBTQ students absorb from society, and particularly their culture. Attendees also stressed that affirming LGBTQ messaging and programs needs to take place at all grade levels, not just high school.

I think in the Imperial Valley, what we need is probably to increase the understanding and the awareness...The reason why I feel that's so important is because I did all of my education here in Imperial Valley and I was always bullied...People always were making comments like, [said in a negative tone] "Oh, you're gay." And I would believe it back then—like it was a bad thing. I think that that is something that definitely needs to change with the youth—what they think is a bad thing. Especially considering all of the machismo and marianismo in our communities here. It's deeply embedded into our culture. We're 90% plus Hispanic here, and it's something that is not going away. ... There's always been anti-LGBTQ hate, always in Imperial Valley, always.

I don't see any awareness about LGBTQ anything in K through 12 schools. Maybe some high schools have like a GSA club. But what about at elementary schools? What about in middle schools? I know I would have benefited learning and hearing and seeing about all this as a child growing up here in Imperial County. But they just always oppose, there always just seems to be some opposition to that here in Imperial County... As someone who did all of their education here, that would have probably really changed my life.

Many attendees spoke about the need for mental health support in the schools for parents of LGBTQ students. When a youth comes out, there are no services for the parents, or to help both the parents and the youth to come together.

I think that a conjunction with mental health support and LGBT at the schools would be helpful for the parents. But especially when they go to the mental health providers that they have help for the parents, and for the child or for the adult.

I think that we tend to leave behind parents and other allies. ... When you come out, it can be difficult for everyone involved, and that kind of difficulty can make things worse, sometimes. [choking up] It took my parents almost a year to really come to terms with my coming out.

I just want someone that can help me be more comfortable with expressing my sexuality and identity with my family.

There is a need for education to reduce the stigma of seeking out and accessing mental health services. The stigma faced by attendees created both a barrier to them seeking services, as well as a need to keep silent about any mental services they were receiving.

There's a lot of education that needs to happen amongst the larger community of breaking the stigma going to see a therapist for something. I definitely have a few relatives I would never tell I'm seeing a therapist for something, because I already know their questions. They're gonna be like, "What's wrong with you?"

The Imperial Valley LGBT Resource Center is definitely an asset for those LGBTQ individuals who have been able to access their services. While the Center has tried to promote their services and who they are, the word is not always getting out. In addition, the Center is frequently contacted by individuals who misconceive what the Center is. The Center needs more funding in order to increase staff capacity to both provide services and promote them. In addition, the Center needs both increased promotion and accurate messaging by the Imperial County Behavioral Health Dept.

The [IV LGBT Resource] Center hasn't even been around for very long, and I only found out about it because my mom saw a post on Facebook. So I think getting the word out a bit more. Who knows how many people are wanting services like this, but don't even realize that they have these resources available to them?

I feel like there has been a lot of promotion. But it just seems the word isn't getting out. So it's really confusing ...to hear, "I don't know that." I guess we still need to promote the Center more.

I've had phone calls, people asking me if I can send them a 15 year old. And I think: "Who do you think this is?!" You know, I really get upset when people have the bad idea. ... I had a guy come in saying that he really thought he was gonna see guys in pink shorts and on roller skates here at the Center. So again, it's that misconception.

Although it is a misconception, one attendee felt it was also important to note:

Nothing wrong with guys in pink shorts on roller skates

As stated previously, finding and receiving LGBTQ affirming and knowledgeable services in Imperial County is very difficult. Attendees voiced a need for Peer Support Specialists both at Imperial County and at the IV LGBT Resource Center.

We need Peer Support Specialists. There's none. And in [Imperial] County, they are hired under another name, another title. They are peers, but they are not doing nothing that has to do with peer work. ... The peer support that they have...do not have the lived experience as a Peer Support Specialists should have. ...And we definitely need paid Peer Support Specialists here in the Valley. ...Like I said, there's not. If there is some, there is very little, the amount is very little.

Very exciting to have them [volunteers and interns] here [the IV LGBT Resource Center]. But one thing that I've been advocating for is a paid Peer Support Specialist, and a paid therapist, even if they do part-time work.

Local supports

The IV LGBT Resource Center was the most frequently, and almost only, mentioned local support for LGBTQ mental health. Pride events and other activities were also noted. Finally, one attendee talked about support they receive at their school.

I think the fact that we have a resource center at all, and that we have Pride events, before the pandemic. I think that just knowing that really helped me being able to speak with other people in the community. Weekly activities, and then these planned events, that was extremely good for me.

Like in everything else, we feel more comfortable with somebody that really understands, has personal experience with the struggles, the challenges—even overcoming some of those. The Center does have that.

COVID has really dampered a lot of what we wanted to do this year... But nonetheless, we're here. ... It takes it takes a community to help a community.... We do have our doors open Monday through Friday, starting at 10am. There are still some things that we're doing at the Center. ... We help people on a continuous basis. And some people only see us is that: a resource in case I need help. For the community, we're more than that—we are that safe space.

There are clubs at my school that educate me and make me feel accepted as who I am.

Innovative ideas

Attendees spoke about the healing aspects of programs that would allow for the creative expression of emotions through art, music, and other types of creativity. One attendee noted that music has special significance in this community and would be a way to draw in youth.

I've always used creativity like that to kind of explore my personal feelings. ... In my family...a lot of my older relatives said that they never really had the chance to explore their artistic creativity. So I think just a casual class like this would be a good outlet for people of all ages to explore their creative emotions.

I also enjoy putting/expressing my feelings through my art.

It [art] keeps your mind occupied.

For me, music is a very big part of my own recovery, because it helped me not only express myself, but it gave me happiness. ... If I'm feeling sad, I will express myself with those songs. And I think a program ... for people that like to sing or just like to listen, maybe that could help, because it helped me.

Music was always a huge thing. ... Some people call people who are in band "band geeks." But here if you were in band, you're actually cool. So it was very respected always being in band and learning how to play an instrument here. So I do feel like that would really pull in a lot of people.

As spoken of previously, there is a need and a desire to involve parents of LGBTQ youth in order to promote acceptance and well-being. Attendees suggested that programming that would bring both parents and youth together in the mutual pursuit of art, music, or other creativity could address part of this need.

I think that we tend to leave behind parents and other allies. ... When you come out, it can be difficult for everyone involved, and that kind of difficulty can make things worse, sometimes.] It took my parents almost a year to really come to terms with my coming out. So I think activities that focus around the parent, child, or sibling dynamics, I think things like that would be very, very helpful in the long run.

I'm thinking that classes for the parent and the LGBTQ individual would help strengthen the relationship between them. It would help the parent enjoy and accept the individual's life by seeing them do and enjoy project and activities that are familiar to the parent.

Attendees had a lengthy discussion regarding the merits of online video games as a learning tool and as way to stay connected in areas where the neighborhood is unsafe or there are no other recreational outlets. Attendees emphasized that online video games can help strengthen a sense of community when in-person support is not viable or desired. Finally, this could be a very effective format to reach youth in a way that other mental health outreach has not. The chat feature (within the video game) is one area where there is an opportunity to offer other activities and resources to youth outside of the video game itself. In other words, the video game

Gender Phluid Collective is based in San Diego. What they've done, throughout the pandemic, is really innovated in the sense that they've transitioned all of their in-house in-person gamer nights to an online format.

I was one of those people that thought video games is always horrible and bad for you. And it's not true. I mean, I figured it out on the other side of the coin, that it's just extremely beneficial as well.

I have a very similar experience with video games!

Growing up, I played the video games in lieu of going outside many times due to a hostile environment in the neighborhood playground/battleground.

I honestly felt more comfortable at home than I did outside, especially because Imperial County lacks recreational centers with vibrant, engaging activities like in more metropolitan areas like San Diego.

Honestly, I want to say it's a failure here, county wide, trying to engage the youth with mental health services as a whole. And I think that one thing that has really drawn in the youth is video games. ... And it's even more interesting what's happening with the whole Esports¹ industry really exploding because it's so successful at bringing in youth. That's a fact. ... I think that innovative wise, I think that video games are going somewhere. Because we all know that video games are not just to play. ... I've learned a majority of my vocabulary because of the video games... There's just so many words in English that I wouldn't know if I would have never played the video games.

¹ **Esports** (also known as **electronic sports**, **e-sports**, or **eSports**) is a form of competition using [video games](#). Esports often takes the form of organized, [multiplayer video game](#) competitions, particularly between [professional](#) players, individually or as teams.

As mentioned previously, lack of infrastructure and economic disparities has created a “digital divide” for members of LGBTQ communities, as well as residents of Imperial Valley in general. Attendees suggested that the County look to how other countries have addressed this issue through Internet Cafes that could provide community members with both Internet and the hardware needed to take advantage of online mental health resources, as well as offering the possibility of a social outlet.

I've noticed that in a lot of other foreign countries outside of the US, they have Internet Cafes where people can come together not only with each other, but for themselves. ... They have a really great computer, they can do whatever they need to do and maybe even hang out. ... I think something like that would be very beneficial, especially in regards to mental health and community.

I love the idea of the internet cafe. It is social and covers the need for communication.

Summary

Finding LGBTQ knowledgeable and affirming providers in the local area is very difficult, and LGBTQ residents, particularly transgender and nonbinary individuals, have to travel long distances in order to receive the care they need. The Imperial Valley LGBT Resource Center is the only LGBTQ-specific agency in the area. The Center needs greater support, both financial and through accurate promotion from Imperial County BHS. Imperial Valley LGBTQ youth experience lack of support from their families and in their school environment. Mental health and other support services need to find ways to support parents of LGBTQ youth, and bring parents and youth together. Attendees at the Listening Session offered suggestions for meeting the needs of LGBTQ Imperial Valley residents, including training local providers, providing affirming LGBTQ support at all grade levels in schools for both students and parents, providing programming and services that bring families and their LGBTQ youth together, more effective outreach to youth, and increasing access to the Internet.