

Inventory of Aboriginal Services, Issues and Initiatives in Vancouver

Two-Spirit / LGBT

Relevant Details

Many Aboriginal people refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gendered people as Two-spirited. This term is being used more as Aboriginal people learn the meaning behind the term. In essence, the term Two-spirit acknowledges that a LGBT person has both a male and female spirit within them. The term is also used to ensure that the history of Two-spirit people within many Aboriginal cultures is not lost or minimized.

Historically, many Aboriginal communities held Two-spirit people in high regard as medicine people, healers, and mediators who could relate to both the female and male contexts. The traditional Aboriginal worldview of inclusiveness and respect allowed for Two-spirit people who identified primarily with the opposite gender of their physical gender to fill unique roles within their communities. For instance, a male Two-spirit person could help with cooking, childminding or other activities normally fulfilled by females, or a female Two-spirit person could participate in normally male-centered activities such as hunting.

Unfortunately colonization, especially through the residential school experience, has led to widespread homophobia in most Aboriginal communities. The forced conversion to Christianity and its beliefs drastically changed the worldview of Aboriginal people, not only about Two-spirit people, but also women, children, and Elders.

Many Two-spirit people cannot live openly as a Two-spirit person in remote Aboriginal communities for fear of their personal safety and public ridicule. For these reasons, many Two-spirit people are forced to leave their home communities to live in larger urban centres where there is a LGBT community that they can 'fit into'. Even though urban centres are often more welcoming of Two-spirit individuals, there is still widespread homophobia in urban Aboriginal communities, so many of these individuals remain isolated. Aboriginal people in general have a suicide rate 4 - 6 times higher than non-Aboriginal people in Canada, but due to the factors listed above, for Two-spirit individuals the rate is even higher.

Who's Involved?

Aboriginal Wellness Program (255 East 12th Avenue)

- Weekly groups for Two-spirit people (held periodically).

Urban Native Youth Association (1640 East Hastings Street)

- UNYA previously offered a Two-spirit youth program that was quite successful, but the funding was discontinued. While the loss of funding left a large gap in service, UNYA's staff work hard to ensure their programs are safe and welcoming to Two-spirit Native youth.

A & D Service Provider's Networking Group (59 West Pender Street)

- Working group with the purpose of facilitating networking and information sharing, discussing issues in providing services to LGBT clients, and to make it easier to find appropriate places to refer LGBT / Two-spirit clients.

Partnerships

- None

Committees

- None

Trends

- Aboriginal communities are beginning to realize that the homophobia does exist has its roots in outside influences that disregarded the traditional Aboriginal ways of including and honouring all people within their communities. This realization has begun to make it safer for Two-spirit individuals to live openly, but still in a cautious way. This trend is slightly better in urban communities such as Vancouver.
- There are now a few programs that actively encourage Two-spirit participation.
- Some Two-spirit young males who come to Vancouver end up working in the sex trade.

Gaps

- There are no specific programs for Two-spirit people. Programs are needed that can help Two-spirit people and others understand the traditional roles of Two-spirit people, what led to the homophobia in Aboriginal communities, what issues Two-spirit people face, and how to better support and welcome them into the community.

Contact Information

Addresses, phone, fax, email, and website information for any of the organizations above can be found in the Contact Information section of this manual.