

Friday, June 18, 2021

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Two foster agencies in Philly won't place kids with LGBTQ people

Bethany and Catholic Social Services have policies that turn away potential LGBTQ foster parents at a time the system is desperate for good families.



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A sign for Bethany Christian Services in Jenkintown. The organization is one of two foster care providers that don't work with LGBT ... [Read more](#)
JESSICA GRIFFIN/Staff Photographer



by Julia Terruso

Published Mar 13, 2018

Megan Paszko spent countless hours researching how to become a foster parent in Philadelphia. She compiled all the information organizations needed and mailed, emailed, faxed, and even hand-delivered applications.

Months passed before anyone responded, and then Bethany Christian Services got back to her and said there was an orientation for interested foster parents that week. Paszko and her wife drove to Elkins Park. They were the first people to arrive. They'd also be the first to leave.

"The trainer approached us, and she was really nice, but she told us, 'I just want to be upfront. This organization has never placed a child with a same-sex couple,'" Paszko said. "She told us she didn't want to waste two hours of our time."

In a follow-up call with administrators, the couple were told that Bethany does not work with LGBTQ people because of the church's views on homosexuality. They were offered names of other agencies to try.

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"I just couldn't believe it," said Paszko, who lives with her wife in Brewerytown. "There are so many kids out there who need homes, you're really going to deny them a good one?"

At the same time that the city's Department of Human Services [is urgently calling for more foster parents](#), two of its foster care agencies, Bethany and Catholic Social Services, operate under policies that turn away LGBTQ people who come knocking.

The organizations, which also offer adoption services, are likely violating city contract rules that forbid discrimination. Philadelphia's fair practices ordinance, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, is included in all city contracts, said Rue Landau, executive director of the Human Relations Commission

"What a tragedy for the kids of Philadelphia," said Mary Catherine Roper, deputy legal director for the ACLU of Pennsylvania. "This agency is putting its own view on religion above the needs of its kids."

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Roper said the position could also be unconstitutional: "A government doesn't get to use a contractor to implement religious programs and when you start saying, 'We're running this as a religious program such that we won't take you because you don't fit our religious view,' then the city is paying for a religious program, and that's a problem under the First Amendment."

DHS said it was unaware, until contacted by the Inquirer and Daily News, of the policies held by the two organizations. Bethany Christian Services has had a contract with the city since 1996 and Catholic Social Services since 1997.

DHS spokeswoman Heather Keafer called both groups' stances "deeply concerning," given an ongoing push to recruit more LGBTQ people to become foster parents.

"We actively recruit individuals that represent the diversity of our city, including diversity of sexual orientation, genders, race, religions, and communities to provide quality foster care to Philadelphia's most vulnerable children and youth," Keafer said.

The city's Law Department is reviewing the issue while DHS works with the Human Relations Commission to investigate policies at both organizations, Keafer said. The department is also reviewing policies of all 26 foster care agencies it works with. The city will continue to recruit LGBTQ parents, [including at an event March 22 at the William Way LGBT Community Center](#) hosted by the Office of LGBT Affairs .

Last year, Bethany Christian Services was reimbursed \$1.3 million for operating foster homes for 170 children, representing 1.5 percent of the department's payments to foster care providers. Catholic Social Services was reimbursed \$1.7 million in the same year for 266 children, representing 1.9 percent of the amount paid.

Joe DiBenedetto, a spokesman for Bethany, said the organization places children with married couples made up of two parents of the opposite sex, or in some cases individuals. He said the organization does not believe it is in violation of any city ordinances. "This has been our practice throughout our nearly 75 years of operation and is based on our adherence to what we believe to be foundational Biblical principles," he said.

Ken Gavin, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, said Catholic Social Services wasn't aware of any recent inquiries from same-sex couples but confirmed that the organization would not work with interested LGBTQ people if approached.

"Catholic Social Services is, at its core, an institution founded on faith-based principles," Gavin said. "The Catholic Church does not endorse same-sex unions, based upon deeply held religious beliefs and principles. As such, CSS would not be able to consider foster care placement within the context of a same-sex union." Gavin said that arrangement is a "well-established and long-known one in our relationship with DHS."

Both organizations work with LGBTQ youth. That can send a mixed message to children and teens in their care, said Currey Cook, an attorney who heads Lambda Legal's Youth in Out-of-home Care Project.

"How do you pretend you can simultaneously say we serve all youth and do a good job serving all youth while at the same time you're saying same-sex couples are not real parents, are not good parents?" Cook said. "LGBT youth who have faced so much isolation, stigma, prejudice in the system are left wondering, 'What's going to happen if I come out, and I'm being served by parents or an agency that basically says trans parents, LGBT people, aren't good parents?'"

Cook said Pennsylvania could benefit from a more explicit nondiscrimination policy. Its [state code prohibits discrimination against children based on sexual orientation](#) but does not say anything specific about prospective foster or adoptive parents.

A nationwide tension

Similar conflicts have sprouted up across the country in recent years as states have legalized same-sex marriage. Before laws started changing, religious-conflicted organizations could avoid working with LGBTQ people by requiring foster parents to be legally married, Cook said.

His organization sued the [federal government and the Catholic Conference of Bishops](#) last month after married lesbian professors were told they could not foster a refugee child through Catholic Charities of Fort Worth, Texas. A woman at the organization told them foster parents must "mirror the Holy Family," according to the suit.

[The ACLU sued the State of Michigan last year](#) after two same-sex couples were turned down by Bethany Christian Services and Catholic Social Services there. Michigan is one of a growing number of states to pass laws explicitly allowing religious-based discrimination. Similar bills are percolating in Georgia, Oklahoma, [and Kansas](#).

Pennsylvania has no such law but religious nonprofits often discriminate quietly, said Leslie Cooper, an attorney with the ACLU's national office, who is handling [the Michigan case](#).

Lawyers for Bethany and Catholic Social Services have defended their clients' stances in court documents by saying that requiring religious organizations to comply with nondiscrimination laws would force them to close, meaning fewer organizations to help kids in need.

Cooper said a religious organization could always change its affiliation, which occurred in Illinois after a foster care agency associated with the Catholic Church broke off and rehired the same staff to operate independently.

"The premise that there would be no one to do this work is just false," she said.

Both the archdiocese and Bethany say they always direct interested LGBTQ parents to other agencies.

Paszko and her wife are now working with Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia to become certified foster parents, but the journey has not been easy.

They started sending out requests for information to various agencies in July. Calls and emails went unanswered. An application Paszko hand-delivered was mailed back to her with no explanation. A home visit scheduled weeks ago was canceled unexpectedly. The couple took off from work to get background checks but upon arrival, learned the center no longer offered the screenings. They don't attribute all these roadblocks to discrimination but to a system ill-equipped to catch interested parents.

"If you work and you actually have the financial means to help a kid, I feel like the system is not set up to help

you do that," Paszko said. "There have just been so many stops along the way where I've just said, 'Ugh, this is not meant to be.'"

Interested in fostering? Call 215-683-5709 or email fosteringphilly@phila.gov. Learn more at beta.phila.gov/fosteringphilly

Anyone who believes they were discriminated against may contact the PCHR at 215-686-4670 or pchr@phila.gov.

Published March 13, 2018



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I cover politics and our divided electorate. I'm interested in what unites and separates us, shifts in voting trends, and grassroots movements.

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