



**Interview with Leigh Braden—CEO and lead consultant at LTB Consulting LLC, as well as a prominent and very active LGBTQIA+ advocate in Philadelphia, a consultant for ASCI and a foster parent—on issues facing the child welfare system concerning LGBTQIA+ youth**

**ASCI:** What makes Philadelphia unique in its support of the LGBTQIA+ community and its youth population?

**Leigh Braden:** I think what makes the city stand out—and what has made it stand out more recently—is that we have an Office of LGBT Affairs. Mayor [John] Street, who implemented it, saw a need for a representative in his cabinet who was communicating with the LGBTQIA+ community, taking their concerns and elevating them to a place of importance. I feel like that has always put Philadelphia on a different playing field, just because our local government has really paid attention to the community. They see it as a valuable resource. They see the LGBTQIA+ community as an asset.

I rave about Amber Hicks, who is the Office of LGBT Affairs' executive director. She has been amazing. When she took over that position, she really became very invested in the community in a very personal way. She has a particular passion for child welfare—she's a social worker—so, she's been instrumental in forging pathways with DHS and school systems. She's really confronted head-on conflicts that have occurred in the community.

The point is, having that office [means] our city government recognizes that this community is important, and vital to the city's growth and income. It's a group of people who need to be protected. Also, we are one of two counties in Pennsylvania—Montgomery and Philadelphia—that have protection laws for LGBTQIA+ people regarding employment and housing. The rest of the state does not have that. So, if you live in either one of those counties, or work in one of those counties, you cannot be discriminated against, fired or evicted [based on sexual and/or gender identity].

**ASCI:** Right, it's something like 30 states where you can be fired just because of your orientation or gender identity/expression. And so, the unemployment rate is higher within the LGBTQIA+ community.

**LB:** It's a very common practice. It's hard for them to obtain good employment. It's a real issue.

**ASCI:** That also speaks to the youth. There are many support services that help them get through life while facing discrimination. It's wonderful, especially if they're staying local ... being able to get a summer job while they're in high school and build toward their career knowing they are protected in that way. They don't start out feeling defeated.

**It's a very welcoming city. What can other jurisdictions learn from Philly?**

**LB:** I think [appointing] an LGBTQIA+ Liaison would be a great place for cities to start. As far as the child welfare system, when [youth are] in an area where there are no supports—and even further, if the community is highly ostracized—child welfare agencies are the only place where those kids can get support and work with their families.

**ASCI:** What do you think agencies can implement? What kind of programming would you suggest they start with?

**LB:** First of all, the internet has allowed kids and LGBTQIA+ folks who are really isolated to be connected to community. So, just creating policies within your agencies that allow and affirm that teenagers and emerging adolescents who are gender variant, or a sexual minority, be able to access these resources online—that is *huge*. Being able to connect with other kids across the country; being able to connect with other agencies across the country; not feeling so isolated ... the LGBTQIA+ world online is quite big. It's actually pretty impressive in terms of how it's able to wrap its arms around people. It's saved lives. It's saved children's lives who were high risk for suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, etc.

Getting training is always good—there's nothing wrong with training—but I really feel strongly that there needs to be policies in place to back up that training. Sometimes people will do trainings, but you don't see change. You know the people you work with and their attitudes haven't shifted, and it hasn't been an organic, natural experience the agency has gone through.

I think if an agency is serious about meeting the needs of these kids, they will seek out adults who are in the LGBTQIA+ community to come work for them, because they will recognize that if you don't have voices and representation in your organization, you're not going to make the best choices [for this population]. You need diversity, and this is a piece of diversity. It's reflective of the children and maybe even the birth parents that you may be working with.

The other simple thing that they could do is create safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ youth. Recruit and train, bring the community into the agency, put policies in place that are

affirming and allow kids to be who they are. It takes nothing to start a support group for queer kids. Anybody can do it. Give them a safe place. Take them out on trips. Let them meet one another. Let them develop friendships. Let them have dating relationships. This is all a part of growing up. It doesn't have to be therapeutic. It just has to be affirming ... just has to be an opportunity for them to be social and get to know each other and not feel so alone. In very isolated communities, that is the most painful thing for folks who live there. They have *no* sense of community. They feel like they're the only one.

**ASCI:** Do you think it would be beneficial for agencies to meet with LGBTQIA+ community groups, instead of just having a training, where agency employees go to an LGBTQIA+ organization and talk to leaders and see people who are out and doing great work?

**LB:** This is an interesting question, because the LGBTQIA+ community at large has always had a history of being an adult-focused movement. There are a number of reasons why that exists because people used to come out much later in life, but there are always queer kids coming out. Those spaces/LGBTQIA+ centers are still considered very sacred and safe. So, I think it is important for an agency like ASCI to partner with such [organizations] where you do things in tandem, support each other, share resources ... but I think the work of dealing with families that may be rejecting or systems that are broken in our child welfare system, that's ASCI's job. [LGBTQIA+ organizations] do not exist to help straight people become affirming. They exist to support their own community. There is something sacred and important about that safe space, particularly for youth who may not be out.

**ASCI:** We talked about integrating families into the process and educating them. From the LGBTQIA+ perspective, what does cultural competence look like? How can agencies move toward cultural competency for this population?

**LB:** I think the reason why it's been a natural progression for ASCI is because their mission has always been to focus on family, and having that paradigm forces you to be more culturally competent because you recognize that, if you're going to meet a family where they're at, you have to get with where they're at ... whatever that means [for them]. You can't assume they are a "throwaway family." No family should be thrown away. They should all be explored and supported, and we should be trying to connect these kids with family.

Other agencies should do the math of changing the culture from within, forming the group internally who want to work on this. Interviewing community, resource parents, birth parents, staff, leadership, frontline workers ... what are they saying about this issue? How do they feel? Listen to what they have to say. Then take that information and make recommendations for policy change. Go out and hire people from the LGBTQIA+ community. Every agency should have a group for LGBTQIA+ employees and every agency should make the commitment. Just like they make commitments to bring in cultural diversity, they should commit to bringing in sexual minorities and gender variant people, as well: "How powerful would it be if we had a transgendered person on our staff? Wouldn't that be amazing?"

**ASCI:** After they age out of the system, what's it like for older LGBTQIA+ youth who weren't able to reconnect with their families?

**LB:** They truly do not have a strong sense of validation or self-worth.

But I think it is completely conceivable that after an LGBTQIA+ child is taken from a rejecting family, if the family goes through the process and the work and actually makes steps in the right direction and becomes more affirming and understanding, and gets the education they need ... even if that child never returns home to live, if they maintain connection with family, there is an opportunity for reunification in adulthood. There is an opportunity to continue to have a connection. It doesn't have to be, "I can never have you in my life." We would never say that to any other kid in foster care. We would always want them to be connected to their roots because we recognize that that is extremely important. It is even more important to LGBTQIA+ youth, because there's that component of being rejected. If agencies can help families come to a place of understanding and acceptance, they've done an amazing thing for that youth. They've really helped them not be so wounded by their experience. The work has to be there. That work is complicated, very hard and needs a lot of patience.

**ASCI:** What kind of supports are available in Philly to kids who have aged out of the system? If they're continuing to struggle, is there anything for them?

**LB:** I would say that all LGBTQIA+ support services for youth go up to [age] 24, in general. [Attic Youth Center](#), [Delaware Valley Legacy Fund](#) ... [Project Home](#) opened up a subsidized permanent residence for youth who had experienced homelessness, were queer-identified and/or had gone through child welfare. In total, I think they have 60 units. When they opened, the application process was filled in, like, a week. The need is so great.

**ASCI:** It's like winning the lottery for these kids when they get into a program like that.

**LB:** [Youth Health Empower Project](#) centers are daytime drop-in centers for primarily homeless LGBTQIA+ youth, meaning youth can take a shower, do laundry, get food. It's like a shelter but during the day. When you think about shelters, it's important to have day shelters, not just night shelters. I never realized that until I had my own small shelter. So, those are some of the bigger organizations that are out there if you're a kid in foster care.

The [Achieving Independence Center \(AIC\)](#) works with kids older than 21 who have aged out. So long as you were in the system, you can come back and access their services, and they have a lot of wonderful services. They've helped kids go to college and helped with employment, buying textbooks or computers, tutoring, etc.—all the things that family would do to get a child ready for college. [These organizations] can fill that gap.

I would say that we have really nice services out there, but what we are missing are affordable housing, career-focused college support, having homes that can receive kids coming home from college so that they're not coming home to a shelter for holidays and summertime. DHS does some of that, but I think more should be done and I think it can

be done outside of DHS. It could be its own separate organization that identifies with not just kids in care, but also kids who are homeless and going through college being able to come home to a family.