

A RESOURCE
GUIDE TO
COMING
OUT



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATIONTM

Being brave doesn't mean that you're not scared. It means that if you are scared, you do the thing you're afraid of anyway.

Coming out and living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or supportive straight person is an act of bravery and authenticity.

Whether it's for the first time ever, or for the first time today, coming out may be the most important thing you will do all day.

Talk about it.

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There is no one right or wrong way to come out. It's a lifelong process of being ever more open and true with yourself and others — done in your own way and in your own time.



WELCOME

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans are sons and daughters, doctors and lawyers, teachers and construction workers. We serve in Congress, protect our country on the front lines and contribute to the well-being of the nation at every level.

In all that diversity, we have one thing in common: We each make deeply personal decisions to be open about who we are with ourselves and others — even when it isn't easy.

We express that openness by telling our friends, family, co-workers and even strangers that — among all the other things we are — we're also lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

In so doing, we meet a challenge that was handed to each of us at birth: to be honest about this aspect of our lives, even when it's hard, and to talk with the people we care about, even when we don't know all the words.

Each of us meets this challenge in our own way and in our own time. Throughout the process of coming out and living ever more openly, you should always be in the driver's seat about how, where, when and with whom you choose to be open.

This guide was designed to help you through that process in realistic and practical terms. It acknowledges that the experience of coming out and living openly covers the full spectrum of human emotion — from fear to euphoria.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation hopes this guide helps you meet the challenges and opportunities that living openly offers to each of us.

A Special Note:

No resource can be fully applicable to every member of the LGBT community. Therefore, HRC offers other resources beyond this general guide, including materials specifically designed for transgender people, African-Americans, Latinos/as and more. Visit www.hrc.org/comingout for additional information.



BEING OPEN WITH YOURSELF

From birth, most of us are raised to think of ourselves as fitting into a certain mold. Our culture and our families teach us that we are “supposed” to be attracted to people of a different sex, and that boys and girls are supposed to look, act and feel certain ways.

Few of us were told we might fall in love with someone of the same sex, or that we might have a gender identity that differs from the body into which we were born. That’s why so many of us are scared, worried or confused when facing these truths.



“It’s those first five minutes in coming out to your friends or acquaintances that are really the hardest. But after that, things get better than before because there’s nothing standing in between you anymore.”

Opening up to the possibility that you may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or even just questioning means opening up to the idea that you’re on a path that’s your own. It’s also why coming out and living ever more openly is a profoundly liberating experience.

In the end, just as at the beginning, the first person you have to be open with is yourself.

Throughout the coming out process, it’s normal to feel:

- Scared
- Confused
- Vulnerable
- Empowered
- Exhilarated
- Relieved
- Proud
- Uncertain
- Brave
- Affirmed



DECIDING TO TELL OTHERS

Most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are anymore. They want their relationships to be stronger, richer, more fulfilling and more authentic.

Once we do come out, most of us find that it feels far better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of ourselves.

We also come to recognize that our personal decision to live openly helps break down barriers and stereotypes that have kept others in the closet. And in doing so, we make it easier for others to follow our example.

The Benefits of Coming Out:

- Living an open and whole life.
- Developing closer, more genuine relationships.
- Building self-esteem from being known and loved for our whole selves.
- Reducing the stress of hiding our identity.
- Connecting with others who are LGBT.
- Being part of a strong and vibrant community.
- Helping to dispel myths and stereotypes about who LGBT people are and what our lives are like.
- Becoming a role model for others.
- Making it easier for younger LGBT people who will follow in our footsteps.



"Admitting to myself that I was gay took a long time. Once I was past that step, I realized that not everyone would accept me. But it's not about them. It's about me, living my life as the person I really am."

Along with these benefits, there are also risks. As constructive as the decision is, the reaction of others can be difficult, maybe even impossible, to predict.



“Certainly, there was a wide spectrum of reactions — from warmly accepting to cold and judgmental. But mostly, I was just projecting my own insecurities onto others.”

The Risks of Coming Out:

- Not everyone will be understanding or accepting.
- Family, friends or co-workers may be shocked, confused or even hostile.
- Some relationships may permanently change.
- You may experience harassment or discrimination.
- Your physical safety may be at risk.
- Some young people, especially those under age 18, may be thrown out of their homes or lose financial support from their parents.

You're in Charge:

When you weigh the benefits and risks of being open about who you are, it's important to remember that the person in charge of your coming out journey is you. You decide who to confide in, when to do it and how. You also decide when coming out just may not be right, necessary or advisable.

And, Keep in Mind:

There is no one right or wrong way to come out or live openly. Choosing to come out or to be open does not mean you have to be out at all times or in all places — you decide how, where and when, based on what's right for you. Your sexual orientation and gender identity are important pieces of you, but they do not have to define you. Living openly doesn't change all the many unique things that make you, you.



MAKING A COMING OUT PLAN

When you're ready to tell that first person — or those first few people — give yourself time to prepare. Think through your options and make a deliberate plan of who to approach, when and how. You may want to ask yourself the following questions:

What kind of signals are you getting?

- You can get a sense of how accepting people will be by the things they say — or don't say — when LGBT-related issues come up. Try to bring them up yourself by talking about an LGBT-themed movie, TV character or news event. If a person's reactions are positive, chances are he or she will be more accepting of what you have to tell them.

Are you well informed about LGBT issues?

- The reactions of others will most likely be based on misinformation, and in some cases, even negative portrayals of LGBT people. If you've done some reading on the subject, you'll be prepared to answer their concerns and questions with reliable and accurate information. Helpful facts and frequently asked questions can be found later in this guide, and more information is available at www.hrc.org.

Do you know what it is you want to say?

- Particularly at the beginning of the coming out process, many people are still answering tough questions for themselves and are not ready to identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. That's OK. Maybe you just want to tell someone that you're attracted to a person of the same sex, or that you feel your true gender does not align with what you were assigned at birth. Labels aren't important; your feelings are. You may also want to try writing out what you want to say, to help organize and express your thoughts clearly.

Do you have support?

- You don't have to do this alone. A support system is an invaluable place to turn for reassurance. Sources of support can be other LGBT people who are living openly, LGBT hot lines, school guidance counselors, a supportive member of the clergy or, if you are coming out for the second or third time, perhaps the person you opened up to initially. A supportive mental health professional often helps people become more comfortable. In fact, these are the first people some of us come out to.



"Everyone needs to make their own decision about when to come out. For me, it's important that people I'm close to know about this important piece of me."

Is this a good time?

- Timing can be important. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses and problems of those to whom you would like to come out. Be aware of major life concerns that may make it difficult for them to respond constructively to yours.

Can you be patient?

- Some people will need time to deal with this new information, just as it took time for many of us to come to terms with being LGBT. When you come out to others, be prepared to give them the time they need to adjust to what you've said. Rather than expect immediate understanding, try to establish an ongoing, caring dialogue.
- Remember, the whole reason you chose to be open with the person is because you care about them. If they react strongly, it's likely because they care about you as well. Keep that in mind as you navigate trying times.



HAVING THE CONVERSATIONS

Fostering strong, deep relationships with your friends and family begins with honesty. Living openly is important because it allows for closer relationships with the people you care about — and ultimately a happier life for you. For most people, coming out or opening up to someone new starts with a conversation.

It's normal to want or hope for positive reactions from the people you tell, including:

- Acceptance
- Support
- Understanding
- Comfort
- Reassurance that your relationship won't be negatively affected
- Confidence that your relationship will be closer
- Acknowledgment of your feelings
- Love

All or some of these positive reactions can result from your coming out conversation, but they may not happen immediately. Putting yourself in the other person's shoes may also be helpful.

A person who has just had someone come out to them often feels:

- Surprised
- Honored
- Uncomfortable
- Scared
- Unsure how to react
- Supportive
- Disbelieving
- Relieved
- Curious
- Angry
- Anxious
- Unsure what to do next

Give the person you're telling the time they need. It may also be helpful to remember that the person you're really doing this for is you. When you're ready to tell someone, consider starting with the person most likely to be supportive. This might be a friend, relative or teacher. Maybe you will tell this person that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Maybe you will simply say that you have questions about your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Again, there is no right or wrong way to do this. You are the expert in knowing what's best for yourself and what you are feeling. When you are ready, here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

- Find a relaxed, private place to have the conversation, and allow adequate time.
- People will usually take their cues from you on how to approach this — so be open and honest and tell them that it's OK to ask questions.

Appropriate and gentle humor can go a long way toward easing anxiety for both you and the person you are speaking with.

Telling Friends

When you're ready to come out to friends, you may be lucky enough to have some who are already out themselves, or who have an LGBT friend or relative of their own. Often, however, coming out to a friend can be a leap of faith. Here are some things you may want to consider:

- **Your friends may surprise you.** Those you thought would be least judgmental may be the first to turn away; those who seem least likely to be accepting sometimes offer the strongest support.
- **Don't assume prejudice.** Earlier, we mentioned that signals can help indicate someone's level of support — or lack thereof. While that's true, it is just as possible to read too much into an off-the-cuff remark. Give your friends a chance to be supportive.
- **Provide resources.** HRC has resources for non-LGBT friends and family member to help them understand and learn more. There are also a number of other organizations listed in this guide that provide similar tools.

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THE COMING OUT CONTINUUM

Coming out and living openly aren't something you do once, or even for one year. It's a journey that we make every single day of our lives.

There are three broad stages that people move through on the coming out continuum. For each person it is a little different, and you may find that at times you move backward and forward through all of the phases at the same time.

Opening Up to Yourself

The period when your journey is beginning — when you're asking yourself questions, moving toward coming out to yourself and perhaps making the decision to tell others.



The list goes on from there. For example, every time you go on vacation with a partner, you may be asked if you and your "friend" would like separated beds. Many transgender people come out again and again following their transition, raising awareness of transgender people with each person they tell.



Coming Out

The period when you're actively talking for the first time about your sexual orientation or gender identity with family, friends, co-workers, classmates and other people in your life.

Living Openly

The ongoing phase after you've initially talked with the people closest to you about your life as an LGBT person, and are now able to tell new people that come into your life fluidly — where and when it feels appropriate to you.

Whether it's proclaimed by a Human Rights Campaign sticker, a rainbow flag or a picture of a partner on your desk, there are a variety of ways that people incorporate coming out into everyday life so they can live openly in a way that feels natural and comfortable.



TELLING FAMILY MEMBERS

No matter what their age, many people are afraid their parents will reject them if they come out. The good news is that you're probably wrong. If, however, you are under age 18 or financially dependent on your parents, consider your decision very, very carefully.

Some reactions you may want to prepare for:

- Some parents may react in ways that hurt. They may cry, get angry or feel embarrassed.
- Some parents will feel honored and appreciate that you have entrusted them with an important piece of truth about yourself.
- Some parents will need to grieve the dreams they had for you, before they see the new, more genuine life you are building for yourself.
- They may ask where they “went wrong” or if they did something “to cause this.” Assure them that they did nothing wrong.
- Some may call being LGBT a sin, or attempt to send their child to a counselor or therapist in the baseless hope that they can “change.”
- Some parents will already know you're lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender — or they might have an inkling. They may have been waiting for you to tell them and find your doing so a relief.
- It may take time for a parent to absorb or come to terms with the information. Good or bad, their initial reaction may not reflect their feelings over the long-term.

The list goes on from there. For example, every time you go on vacation with a partner, you may be asked if you and your "friend" would like separate beds. Many transgender people come out again and again following their transition, raising awareness of transgender people with each person they tell.

Finally, keep in mind this is big news, and there's no timetable for how long it takes parents to adjust.

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“I came to understand that one of the biggest hang-ups was me. I was convinced everybody would have a horrible reaction to my coming out. But my parents were wonderful — as were many others.”



LIVING OPENLY ON YOUR TERMS

As you continue to live openly, here are some other points to consider:

- It's important to remember that the journey from “Coming Out” to “Living Openly” is ongoing and unfolds at your own pace.
- Living openly is something that becomes easier with time. Even after you've been open for years, it will often take a little energy when you tell someone new — but it gets exponentially easier with each person you tell.
- Living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or supportive straight person can help to make it easier for young LGBT people who will follow this generation.
- Living openly can be a passive expression of who you are — such as displaying a rainbow or equality sticker or a loved one's photograph — or it can be a deliberate process involving a planned conversation or the decision to always be ready to affirm your sexual orientation or gender identity should a situation arise.
- Living openly doesn't mean that the sole, or even primary, aspect of your identity is being LGBT. It means making this part of your life a natural piece of you — just like your age, height, hair color or personality.
- Living openly lets other people know, especially those who are judgmental or biased, that their attitudes are theirs alone.
- On a daily basis, you will face decisions about where, when and how to come out — or where, when and why not to. Always remember, this is your journey. You get to decide how to take it.



TEN THINGS EVERY AMERICAN OUGHT TO KNOW

A *New York Times*/CBS News Poll in February 2014 found the 56 percent of Americans support same-sex marriage. In 1996, when Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, only 25 percent of Americans said that gay and lesbian couples should have the right to marry, according to an average of national polls. (*The New York Times*, February 26, 2014)

The federal government would wave \$1 billion each year if same-sex couples could marry nationwide. (2004 congressional Budget Office report)

Ninety-seven percent of transgender people have been harassed on the job because of their gender identity or expression. (2008-2009 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, The Task Force/National Center for Transgender Equality)

The majority (91 percent) of Fortune 500 companies provide explicit protections on the basis of sexual orientation, and 61 percent on the basis of gender identity. (2014 HRC *Corporate Equality Index*)

In 29 states, it is legal to fire someone for their sexual orientation; transgender Americans have no job protection in 33 state. There is no federal employment law that bars discrimination against LGBT people.

Among LGBT youth, 51 percent have been verbally harassed and called names at school, compared to 25 percent among non-LGBT students. Seventeen percent of LGBT youth report they have been physically attacked often, while 10 percent of their non-LGBT peers say the same. (HRC's *Growing Up LGBT in America*, 2012)

Currently, there are only 16 states, plus the District of Columbia, with laws that address discrimination, harassment, and/or bullying of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity. (HRC)

During the lifetime of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," more than 14,000 lesbian and gay service members were discharged from the U.S. military. The policy was repealed in 2011, but transgender service members are still unable to serve openly.

There are at least 2 million children being raised by same-sex couples in the United States -- and probably many more. (2010 U.S. Census)

Of the 5,796 hate crime incidents reported in 2012, 19.6 percent stemmed from sexual orientation bias. (2012 FBI report)



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Many Americans refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression because it feels taboo, or because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help give people the words and meanings to help make conversations easier and more comfortable.

bisexual – A person emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily simultaneously. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary as sexual identity develops over time.

cisgender – A term used to describe people whose gender identity or expression aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

coming out – A lifelong self-acceptance process. LGBT people identify this identity first to themselves, and then may reveal it to others. Publicly identifying one's identity may or may not be part of the coming out process.

gay – A word describing a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.

gender expression – External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through masculine, feminine or gender-variant behavior, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex.

gender identity – One person's innate, deeply-known psychological identification as a man, woman or some other gender.

genderqueer – A word people use to describe their own non-standard gender identity, or by those who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

homophobia – The fear and hatred of or discomfort with, people who love and are sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

internalized homophobia – Self-identification of societal stereotypes by an LGBT person, causing them to dislike and resent their sexual orientation or gender identity.

lesbian – A woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to other women.

LGBT – An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender."

living openly – A state in which LGBT people are out about their sexual orientation or gender identity in their personal, public and/or professional lives.

outing – The act of publicly declaring someone's sexual orientation or gender identity, sometimes based on rumor or speculation, without that person's consent.

queer – Traditionally considered a derogatory term, it has been adopted by many LGBT people (especially young people) to describe themselves.

same-gender loving – A term some prefer to use instead of “gay” or “lesbian” to express attraction to and love of people of the same gender.

sexual orientation – An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual and relational attraction to another person; may be a same-sex, opposite-sex or a bisexual orientation.

sexual preference – A term considered offensive by many LGBT people. It suggests that being LGBT is a voluntary decision that can be “cured.”

straight supporter – A person who supports and honors sexual diversity, acts accordingly to challenge homophobic remarks and behaviors, and explores and understands these forms of bias within him- or herself.

transgender – An umbrella term describing a broad range of people who experience and/or express their gender differently from what most people expect. It includes people who describe themselves as transsexual, cross-dressers or otherwise gender nonconforming.

transphobia – The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people whose gender identity or gender expression do not conform to cultural gender norms.

transsexual – An outdated medical term used to describe people whose gender identity and birth-assigned sex do not match. Many people prefer the term “transgender” to describe themselves.

The Human Rights Campaign would like to thank the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (www.glaad.org) for providing definitions for many of these terms.

“The most important thing you can do is come out. People’s hearts have to change — and meeting someone who is gay can make a person understand and take on new attitudes.”



RESOURCES FROM HRC

HRC provides many free resources on coming out in all aspects of one's life - personal, professional or spiritual.

For more information, visit www.hrc.org/comingout.

Coming Out As A Supporter: A Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Americans

A La Familia

At the Intersection: Race, Sexuality and Gender

Degrees of Equality: A National Study Examining Workplace Climate for LGBT Employees

Guía de Recursos Para Salir Del Clóset

Living Openly in Your Place of Worship

A Resource Guide to Coming Out

A Resource Guide to Coming Out for African Americans

Transgender Visibility: A Guide to Being You

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



NATIONAL LGBT ORGANIZATIONS

**American Veterans
for Equal Rights**

www.aver.us

**Astraea Lesbian
Foundation for Justice**

212-529-8021

www.astraea.org

Bisexual Resource Center

617-424-9595

www.biresource.org

Campus Pride

704-277-6710

www.campuspride.org

**Centerlink - The Community
of LGBT Centers**

954-765-6024

www.lgbtcenters.org

**Gay Asian Pacific
Support Network**

213-368-6488

www.gapsn.org

**Gay and Lesbian
Alliance Against Defamation**

212-629-3322

www.glaad.org

**Gay and Lesbian
Medical Association**

202-600-8037

www.glma.org

**Gay, Lesbian and Straight
Education Network**

212-727-0135

www.glsen.org

Human Rights Campaign

202-628-4160

TTY 202-216-1572

www.hrc.org

Immigration Equality

212-714-2904

www.immigrationequality.org

Lambda Legal

212-809-8585

www.lambdalegal.org

**National Black
Justice Coalition**

202-319-1552

www.nbjc.org

**National Center
for Lesbian Rights**

415-392-6257

www.nclrights.org

**National Center for
Transgender Equality**

202-903-0112

www.transequality.org

**National Gay and
Lesbian Task Force**

202-393-5177

www.thetaskforce.org

**National Minority
AIDS Council**

202-483-6622

www.nmac.org

Trans Law Center

www.transgenderlaw.org

**Parents, Families and
Friends of Lesbians
and Gays**

202-467-8180

www.pflag.org

OutServe-SLDN

202-328-3244

www.sldn.org

RELIGIOUS



ORGANIZATIONS

Affirmation (Mormon)

661-367-2421

www.affirmation.org

Al-Fatiha

202-223-3738

**Association of Welcoming
and Affirming Baptists**

240-515-8664

www.wabaptists.org

**Brethren Mennonite Council
for LGBT Interests**

612-343-2060

www.bmclgbt.org

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians
415-351-2196
www.covnetpres.org

Dignity/USA
800-877-8797
www.dignityusa.org

The Fellowship
415-861-6130
www.radicallyinclusive.com

Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns
flgbtqc.quaker.org

The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (Hindus)
www.galva108.org

Gay Buddhist Fellowship
www.gaybuddhist.org

Gay Lesbian and Affirming Disciples (GLAD) Alliance, Inc.
703-866-4628
www.gladalliance.org

Integrity USA (Episcopalians)
800-462-9498
www.integrityusa.org

The Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation
www.huc.edu/ijso

Keshet (Jewish)
617-524-9227
www.keshetonline.org

Lutherans Concerned
651-665-0861
www.reconcilingworks.org

Metropolitan Community Churches
310-360-8646
www.mcccchurch.org

More Light Presbyterians
www.mlp.org

New Ways Ministries (Catholic)
301-277-5674
www.newwaysministry.org

Reconciling Ministries Network (Methodist)
773-736-5526
www.rmnetwork.org

Reconciling Pentecostals International
219-871-1033
www.rpifellowship.com

Room for All (Reformed Church in America)
201-364-4538
www.roomforall.com

Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International
www.sdakinship.org

Unitarian Universalist Association's Office of BGLT Concerns
www.uua.org/obgltc

The United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns
800-653-0799
www.ucccoalition.org

Unity Fellowship Church Movement
www.unityfellowshipchurch.org/mainsite



HOT LINES

The Trevor Helpline
866-4-U-TREVOR (488-7386)
www.thetrevorproject.org

National Gay and Lesbian Youth Hotline
800-347-TEEN (8336)

GLBT National Youth Talkline
800-246-PRIDE (7743)

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline
888-843-GLNH (4564)

A MESSAGE FROM THE HRC FOUNDATION

Dear Friends,

Thank you for taking time to read and think about *A Resource Guide to Coming Out*.

Coming out can be a daunting process. But as we come out to more people, we often begin to realize that most people are simply happy for us, and that despite the occasional difficulties, we can begin to live our lives as the people we were truly meant to be. What at first was stressful quickly becomes empowering.

More than anything else, what may drive each of us to come out is an intensely human desire to be known and loved authentically for who we are. That is something everyone can relate to – and something we should celebrate and honor in one another.

To those of you who are just starting your coming out journey, we would like to congratulate you. You are entering a brave new part of your life where you will be able to completely realize your dreams and potential.

For those of you who have already been living your lives openly, we hope that you will consider starting new conversations with friends and family about your life as a LGBT person – because, even one person at a time, that extra step is the most important thing each of us can do within our circles to help change hearts and minds.

Wherever you are on your journey, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation is ready to help you – at home, at work, in your community and beyond – by providing resources and tools to help create a more accepting and understanding world for LGBT Americans.

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation helps LGBT people come out and start living openly. As coming out is a lifelong journey, the HRCF also helps LGBT people, as well as supporters, to live openly and talk about their support for equality at home, at work and in their communities each and every day. HRC represents a grassroots force of more than 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide.

A VERY SPECIAL THANKS to our contributors for so graciously sharing their experiences. Thanks also to those who generously agreed to let us use their photos in this guide.

Also, we would like to thank the University of Louisville Center for LGBT Services for allowing us to adapt pieces of their “Safe Zone Project Manual” for this text.

For more copies of this guide, additional coming out resources or more information on the Human Rights Campaign, please contact us at www.hrc.org or 1640 Rhode Island Ave, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.