



# The Ruth Ellis Health & Wellness Center: An innovative care model for LGBTQ youth in Metropolitan Detroit

## CONTEXT

LGBTQ adolescents and young adults are some of the most vulnerable young people in our community. Research has shown correlations between LGBTQ status (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) and depression, suicide attempts, bullying, illicit drug use, homelessness, and increased rates of STDs and HIV. Communities of color are disproportionately affected by these health disparities, and it is predicted that 1 in 2 Black/African American gay and bisexual men in the United States will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime. Studies have shown these inequities are not due to increased risk behavior on the part of individuals within racial/ethnic groups, but are instead related to experiences of stigma, discrimination, and trauma, as well as the structural barriers of economic marginalization, homelessness, and poor access to healthcare.

The urgent need to address these alarming health disparities on a local level has led to an innovative partnership between The Ruth Ellis Center and Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, Michigan. The Ruth Ellis Center is a youth social services agency with the specific mission of providing short and long-term residential safe space and support services for runaway, homeless, and at-risk LGBTQ youth and is one of the nation's leading experts on vulnerable youth who are experiencing residential instability. Henry Ford Health System, one of the nation's leading vertically integrated health care systems, is a Michigan non-profit corporation encompassing Metropolitan Detroit and includes 5 acute care hospitals and over 40 medical centers.

This collaboration, which was initiated in 2015 by former Henry Ford CEO Nancy Schlichting, has led to the creation of a Health and Wellness Center (HWC) on the first floor of the Ruth Ellis drop-in space. The HWC provides affirming and accessible mental health and primary care services including acute care, chronic disease management, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, and gender affirming hormones. Young people can come to Ruth Ellis to have dinner, take a shower, use the computer, get free clothing and food boxes, and, most importantly, build community in a safe space. With the development of the HWC, they can now receive physical and mental health services in an environment in which they are already comfortable and which stands in sharp contrast to traditional clinical environments in which they may experience stigma or outright rejection.

## IMPACT

Medical services have been provided one day a week at the HWC since May, 2016 by staff from Henry Ford's School-Based and Community Health Program in the Department of Pediatrics. The Henry Ford medical team has worked closely with the Ruth Ellis mental health staff to create an integrated program that address both physical and emotional wellbeing. Weekly meetings allow for collaborative case discussions ensuring that even the most complex patients receive the wrap-around services they deserve. Due to support from Henry

Ford, patients receive care and lab tests at no cost (regardless of insurance status) and the electronic health record Epic is used by both medical and mental health staff. Additionally, there is a pharmacy delivery program that allows patients to receive their medication and refills on site, with no out-of-pocket costs.

Since starting this collaboration, medical services have been provided to 101 unduplicated users, ages 16-30 years old, 90% of whom are African American. Of the 101 unduplicated users, 60% are transgender women, 22% are gay and bisexual men and 18% are transgender men. Approximately 40% of the patients presenting to the HWC were already HIV positive and 5 new diagnoses have been made in the course of routine clinical care. As a result, HIV treatment is now provided at Ruth Ellis in addition to standard primary care in collaboration with Henry Ford's Division of Infectious Diseases. For those not already living with HIV, 80% of patients have been started on PrEP, the once daily pill that has been shown to decrease the risk of infection by 99%.

There has been an immense amount of enthusiasm for the program on the part of these patients, many of whom who have expressed relief at finally receiving the care they need in a space where they feel affirmed and respected. Access to no-cost feminizing hormones has been especially motivating for the transgender women, many of whom have returned on a monthly basis, despite housing instability and limited economic resources. These patients are especially grateful to receive care in a space where they are celebrated instead of scorned and have repeatedly shared feedback such as: "Nobody ever does stuff like this for us. Nobody ever comes out here, nobody is interested in taking care of us." Throughout the course of the last year, it has become clear that the most important aspect of these visits is not the medication, but that young people receive the message that their health is valuable and that they are worth taking care of.

## **Ruth Ellis Health & Wellness Center**

### ***Snapshot***

- Quick visits for general medical issues (sore throat, rash, ear infection, cough/cold)
- Visits for longer term medical issues (asthma management, healthy weight, high blood pressure, diabetes, etc.)
- Vision and hearing screening tests with referrals
- STD testing and treatment
- HIV testing and guidance
- HIV prevention services
- Transition care for transgender youth
- Birth control
- Screening for need of emergency services
- Individual, family and group counseling
- Outpatient substance abuse treatment and prevention
- Family Preservation programming to address family conflict related to a child's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression

*A Partnership Between*

