

## Challenging Heterosexism: Towards Non-Heterosexist Policy and Regulation in Health and Social Security Agencies\*

Health and social security agencies have policies and regulations that are generally based in heterosexist assumptions about the nature of family and relationships. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is now interpreted as forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The federal government has consequently implemented legal reforms, and some provinces are following suit. Most Canadian provinces have human rights legislation that also prevents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. However, changes in national and provincial macro-level policy may not be associated with change in policy at the mezzo and micro levels.

The heterosexist bias in community attitudes, particularly outside large metropolitan centres, encourages gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals to remain closeted (except for small groups of friends). Local challenges to heterosexist policies and regulation can be risky. *Challenging Heterosexism* began to address this issue in the context of being lesbian in rural Newfoundland because lesbians are particularly marginalized and vulnerable in a rural context where social values may be conservative and anonymity cannot be maintained. The tools and policy analysis developed in this project can be used in quality assurance, total quality management, accreditation and collective bargaining.

**\* *Challenging Heterosexism was conducted by Leslie Bella, Principal Researcher, and Lori Yetman, Research Coordinator, for the School of Social Work, Memorial University of Newfoundland. This action research project challenges policy-oriented heterosexism, using electronic communication technologies to develop tools through which health and social security agencies and practitioners can assess and correct the heterosexist bias in their programs and activities.***

### Project Tools

- ❖ *The Heterosexism Enquirer, or THE, website* (<http://www.mun.ca/the>) defined the nature of the problem of heterosexism, explained the project and introduced the project partners. A tabloid format and associated exaggerations introduced humour to increase interest and accessibility, and to avoid an "academic" look. *THE* has been welcomed as a quality website. Readers, including academics and the media, indicated the site was useful in their research or when planning educational events.
- ❖ A research-oriented *web conference* using Altavista forum technology provided gay and lesbian registrants with a safe, anonymous and private site to share their own stories about heterosexism and how it can be remedied, and to exchange information about gay positive spaces in their communities. While the researchers would have liked more registration and participation in the web conference, the actual content was relevant and informative.
- ❖ Questionnaires were developed for individuals and institutions to *assess their own heterosexism*. Both questionnaires are available on *THE's* website.
- ❖ The project *analyzed the heterosexism in Newfoundland's social assistance legislation and regulations*. The analysis revealed that legislation is relatively neutral as to sexual orientation, but detailed regulations are discriminatory. The analysis is posted to *THE's* website.
- ❖ Partnerships with community organizations and scholars were strengthened and extended during

the project. Partners contributed to website design, content and promotion, and collaborated on several proposals for future research and action projects. Links were developed with organizations engaged in similar work in other provinces. The result is a broader network of individuals and organizations committed to challenging heterosexism.

## Lessons Learned

- ❖ Newfoundland lags behind the other Atlantic Provinces in computer use and home Internet access (30% compared to 40%); this may have contributed to the low web conference participation rate (32 registrants with only 26, or 81%, from Newfoundland).
- ❖ Site visitors might have relied on work-based or public computer terminals where the risk of being observed could deter participation.
- ❖ Web conference registration required a site visitor to scroll through (and read) an extensive “informed consent” page and instructions on disguising their on-line identity; this process may have been too intricate and discouraged participation.
- ❖ The web conference software proved to be difficult to navigate and control for first time visitors.
- ❖ Activity on the website began lethargically; no one wanted to be the first to say something.
- ❖ Although the web conference was interactive for participants, it was a limited interactive and community-building format. A list serve would be more active and responsive, as well as providing a mass e-mail facility to alert interested people to the posting of new material to the website.

- ❖ At no time during the project did anyone post inappropriate or abusive content to the web conference. In retrospect, the concerns about the risks to participants may have been overstated.

## The Future

- ❖ The new *THEzine* will communicate with site visitors who wish to be kept informed using the blind copy function on mass e-mailing software. With permission, correspondence to *THEzine* will be posted as letters to the editor or as short articles and news items.
- ❖ *The Heterosexism Enquirer* continues to be represented on the Interagency Committee for the Prevention of Violence, providing community partners with up-to-date information on the website.
- ❖ Project leaders provide consultation services to agencies concerning their heterosexist bias through the School of Social Work’s Innovative and Collaborative Social Work Program.

**Visit The Heterosexism Enquirer website at  
<http://www.mun.ca/the>**

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