Sometimes you discover your calling unexpectedly and in the unlikeliest of places. For Phillip Lu, this happened to be a homeless drop-in center for LGBTQ+ youth where he worked as an advocate.

"It blew me away that more than half of the homeless youth I saw at the center had been in the foster care system," said Phillip, who joined the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 2015. "The first time I ever met a social worker was when I was an advocate at the homeless shelter and I quickly realized that social work and child welfare were exactly where I needed to be."

Today, Phillip is one of 75 volunteer LGBTQ+ Champions within the department's 20 regional offices and as part of DCFS' LGBTQ+ Program within the Office of Equity. Their role is to promote equity and representation for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.

Drawing on his experience working with homeless youth and his own difficulties coming out at a young age, Phillip has pursued a role at

Phillip Lu (He/Him/His)

DCFS where he can help youth who identify as transgender, gender non-binary and gender fluid in hopes of preventing the outcomes that he saw firsthand at the homeless shelter.

A study completed in 2014 revealed that one in five foster youth identify as LGBTQ+, reflecting a higher proportion than in the general population, according to the UCLA Williams Institute and the Los Angeles LGBT Center. Many of these youth experience rejection by members of their family because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, a trauma that can have wide-ranging impacts on development and psychological and social well-being.

Despite the data demonstrating the prevalence of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care, Phillip points out that child welfare systems are not necessarily designed to identify and cater to the particular needs of this population.

"I know the statistics, but sometimes I look around and think: 'Where are they?'" said Phillip, who works at the Glendora regional office. "They're hidden because we aren't always asking the right questions and data isn't always reported."

In Phillip's eyes, this lack of visibility represents the root of the problem. There are many resources available for youth, as well as educational support for family members and caregivers to generate greater understanding. However, unless a social worker is aware that a given client identifies as LGBTQ+, connections to such resources do not occur and the department isn't able to support them to the extent they deserve.

"We need to ask the right questions and take steps to help caregivers move beyond acceptance and tolerance and toward affirmation and celebration," Phillip said.

As front-line staff located throughout Los Angeles County, LGBTQ+ Champions are well-positioned to expand awareness and identify local community resources and services specifically targeted for the LGBTQ+ community. The goal is for the champions to use their expertise to provide input and recommendations on best practices, as well as to help establish safe and affirming spaces within the regional offices.

The LGBTQ+ Program recently developed a training curriculum that champions will facilitate at each of the regional offices. This training aims to help social workers learn how best to initiate conversations, talk with youth about sexual orientation and gender identity, and identify actionable steps to better support youth.

"The LGBTQ+ Champions initiative is still in the beginning stages, but I'm excited to see where it goes," Phillip said. "I want to figure out what I can do to support policy change and make this a safe space for youth."

"I realize that not everyone is comfortable raising the flag and being a super advocate, but I want to encourage everyone to take steps in that direction because the numbers don't lie," he added. "We need to collectively shift our energy and be willing to open our hearts, adapt and change our mindset to make sure these young people have the support they need."

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