Podcast: Supporting LGBTQ+ Newcomers

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Guest speaker: Carissa Chantiles and Abby Davies, Resource Coordinators, InReach

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Introduction

Selina Máté: Welcome to the Switchboard podcast. Switchboard is a one-stop resource hub for refugee service providers in the U.S. funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). We provide resources, trainings, communities of practice, and programmatic assistance for programs funded by the ORR. My name is Selina Máté and I will be your host.

Today I am joined by Abby Davies and Carissa Chantiles from InReach. InReach is the world's first tech platform about matching LGBTQ+ people facing discrimination and persecution with safe, verified resources. InReach has a variety of resources dedicated to LGBTQ+ newcomers, asylees, and refugees.

Thank you for joining me today.

Could you both share a bit about your roles at InReach?

Abby Davies: Sure. My name is Abby Davies. I am the International Resource Coordinator and Translation Team Head here at InReach. Um, I've been here for, I guess it's going on four years. Um, so our resource team is responsible for adding new organizations to the InReach app, as well as re-verifying all the resource pages on the app to make sure that they are up to date and as accurate and comprehensive as possible.

As resource coordinators, both Carissa and myself, as well as one other resource coordinator, we manage large teams of trained volunteers, interns and translators to help us in this task, as well as to translate the resource pages into other languages. We also manage and update training materials to make sure that our volunteers are trained on LGBTQ+ rights around the world and especially in the U.S., as well as on factors affecting different diverse LGBTQ+ communities, including immigration and refugee law and policy. So specifically, each of us, as well as our trained volunteers, work with each of these organizations individually to make sure that they are LGBTQ+ affirming, and that they pass the rest of our criteria before then adding it on the app.

Carissa Chantiles: Hi, I'm Carissa Chantiles. I'm also a Resource Coordinator on the InReach team. I've been with the organization for five years now. I started off as a volunteer, just excited about the work that we do, and have been on the hook ever since. There's been a lot of cool opportunities here to grow and expand and do some really interesting work. So it's been a privilege to be here for so many years now.

SM: Wonderful. Welcome, Abby and Carissa. Thank you so much for joining today. Let's get started. So we'll start with our first question.

What are some of the unique challenges that LGBTQ+ refugees in the U.S. face that service providers should be aware of?

AD: So we know, of course, that all refugees, regardless of their LGBTQ+ status, are in especially vulnerable situations. However, LGBTQ+ refugees face a double marginalization. Due to their double identities as both an LGBTQ+ person and as a refugee. So, for example, a lot of what we handle at InReach is looking for service providers that are able to serve both of these populations. So, what happens often is that a service provider may be safe and accessible and have expertise in serving refugees or asylum seekers, but that definitely does not mean that that service provider is also safe, or accessible, or experienced in working with LGBTQ+ clients.

And then, kind of on a personal level, many LGBTQ+ refugees tend to arrive to the U.S. alone, um, maybe due to family or societal stigma back home—and then also in some cases, due to maybe laws back in their home country, such as being unable to bring their families, maybe due to a lack of legal recognition in their home countries. And then once they do arrive in the U.S. many refugees tend to find communities with other refugees from their region, but that's not necessarily the case for LGBTQ+ refugees who often might fear discrimination from their non-LGBTQ+ refugee peers. So many community resources that are available to refugees—such as, you know, support groups, cultural centers, organizations that might offer access to education and employment support and things like that—are not necessarily LGBTQ+ affirming.

So LGBTQ+ refugees might stay away from those community spaces, and it might be hard for them to find friends or a chosen family here in the U.S. And then I do want to call out that trans refugees are especially vulnerable, especially today given the unprecedented 500-plus anti-trans bills that are—have already been—introduced across the country in state legislatures this year alone.

So LGBTQ+ refugees, especially trans refugees, might come to the U.S. thinking that the U.S. is, you know, a beacon of hope for LGBTQ+ refugees fleeing persecution back home, but they might have extreme challenges when they resettle here and they realize that might not be the case depending on where they live. This reality can be very difficult to overcome, especially after a very long journey to find safety. And then they might still not find it, especially as I said, if they resettle in unwelcoming states or communities.

SM: Thanks, Abby. And thanks for pointing out the complexities, especially now. I think that's so important for service providers to keep in the forefront of their minds as they're welcoming these newcomers—and just realizing this never, maybe they never have, you know, walked into a space that is fully welcoming. But especially now they need to be really aware that these newcomers are going to face a multitude of new challenges on top of the challenges they're already experiencing.

How is InReach directly addressing these challenges and creating a more inclusive space for this community?

AD: InReach actually began as Asylum Connect. That was our original name. We rebranded last year. Um, so as Asylum Connect, our focus was explicitly on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. However, we found that that name didn't necessarily match our user base, because people from different documentation statuses and citizenship status, including U.S. citizens, use our app. So we thought the name didn't necessarily reflect our user base. That being said, we maintain very strong ties to that community, whether that being, uh, asylum seekers, refugees, and other immigrants as well. So it's actually possible on our app to see when organizations are focused on immigrants, asylum seekers, and resettled refugees. And then also users themselves are able to filter out the organizations on our app that might be inaccessible to them—for example, if they lack a photo ID, proof of domicile, proof of age, things like that.

So now, um, we do maintain that link still while also being available to all LGBTQ+ communities, as I said, including U. S. citizens. But all immigrants may use our free confidential app to find affirming services that are both affirming for immigrants and refugees, as well as for LGBTQ+ people, and the organizations that we list in our app span really all different types of service providers—whether that be legal services, housing, mental health, medical care, education and employment, community support, translation services, and more.

So, as I mentioned, our app also denotes when organizations are immigrant-led or immigrant-focused, and then also further notes if those services are focused on asylum seekers or resettled refugees. And then also we have services focused on BIPOC people as well as Spanish speakers. And we definitely hope to add many more communities soon.

And then, as I mentioned in my intro, we also manage an in-house translation team, as well as a tool called crowding, which allows us to crowdsource translations. So therefore we're able to provide our app in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian—and hopefully more languages soon as well.

So really at InReach we are focused on intersectionality, trying to make sure that all LGBTQ+ people from different communities—whether that be different ethnicities, different documentation, statuses or different languages—are able to find safe and affirming resources. And then, on the service provider front, um, service providers themselves. So whether that be an attorney or social service provider, they are able to also use our app for their clients to find referrals to other affirming services that their clients may need.

So, um, let's say a client is speaking with their attorney and they are in need of urgent housing and they're an LGBTQ+ refugee. That legal service provider is able to use the InReach app to find LGBTQ+-affirming housing for their client if they're really located anywhere in the U.S., U.S. territories, Canada, and Mexico. That being said, um, InReach can really only add organizations when they exist, of course. So in adding organizations to our app, we of course know that there is a major lack of organizations that are safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ refugee communities, especially in certain parts of the country.

So we partner with organizations working in this space and we lead trainings for service providers on how to provide LGBTQ+-affirming programming. But of course, we are always interested in partnering with organizations that work in these areas to come up with new ways to address the gaps.

SM: Thanks, Abby. This app sounds incredible. It's very exciting. Where can service providers find your app?

AD: We're on InReach.org. And then also you can find us on the app store.

SM: Amazing. Thank you. So next question: in May 2022, Switchboard identified a need for the implementation of more LGBTQ+ refugee serving programs. Given your role as a representative of an organization doing this work...

Why do you think that there is a lack in research and implementation done surrounding these programs and communities?

CC: This is such a good question, and I'm really glad that you asked it. Um, a lot of it is, is based off of some of the information that Abby shared earlier, but I'm just going to dig into some of the details a little bit more to kind of paint a picture for you.

To have strong evidence to build knowledge and use it in decision making, we really need to have two pieces in place. The first one is to have a good definitional understanding of our terms and understand who the populations are and what they need. And the second piece is having good data to be able to do this research to be able to make good decisions off of. So I want to just take a moment to to talk about these and dig into them a little bit.

In terms of definitions and understanding the nuance about people's experience, it's important to think about two different levels. The first level is there's important nuances within the LGBTQ+ community that, you know, in layperson speak—when we're just talking to, you know, people in an average conversation—we sometimes don't recognize that there's actually a variety of identities within that community.

We use the term "LGBTQ" as kind of a bucket for a whole group of people, but it's really a broad category that includes individuals who have widely different experiences, and it's important to be aware of that. So as one example, historic marginalization has led lesbian women to be largely invisible, which leads to all kinds of different problems like—when we're talking about migration, lesbian women being denied asylum because

there's a lack of evidence of dangerous conditions, or them facing experiences that aren't understood as actually being a form of, you know, specific discrimination because of their identity. On the other end of the spectrum, you have transgender individuals who are disproportionately visible because it's more difficult to quote unquote "pass."

And there's a lot of attacks for political purposes and so we have these really big—I mean these are just two examples of within this broad bucket of different identities, but two examples of how there's really different experiences that we should be aware of when we're talking about supporting this community and providing services to them that are affirming of their identity and acknowledge specific needs that they have.

The second level here is that there's important nuances within individuals, and this is something that Abby was speaking to when she was talking about intersectionality. We need to understand how various factors can overlap within an individual to shape their specific and unique identities and experiences.

So when I say various factors I mean things like their national origin, their gender, their race, their age, disability, religion, etc. etc. All of these things come together to contribute, to make a person's experiences unique, and sometimes we forget about that when we talk about LGBTQ+ refugees as a group as if they're sort of monolithic when there's an incredibly—this is an incredibly diverse group of people with diverse experiences, needs, skills, vulnerabilities, etc, etc.

So that's, that's one level here is when we're talking about this definitional piece. All of these things come together, uh, and have a different effect when we're talking about data. So this lack of clear definitions or good understanding of these groups, invisibility, fear, politics, and more—these contribute to poor data that makes strong research difficult. It makes it difficult for organizations to know what the level of need is, what those specific needs are. We know that there are a lot more people coming to the U.S. who are coming here because of persecution in their home states, and many people feel uncomfortable to disclose their sexual orientation or non-conforming gender identity. We know that very few people do every year. I think the statistic is maybe less than 500 refugees who cite homophobic persecution as a contributing factor. And so there are a lot of people who don't share that information for a lot of reasons. And that means that we don't really have a clear picture, not in terms of the kind of numbers that we feel comfortable citing as evidence. And that makes it a really big challenge to decide what the right course of action is, um, and to decide how to support this group of people.

We found that relevant in our work, this lack of nuanced understanding, and lack of data, and this leading to very general services being provided that, uh, that can be very helpful in some cases, maybe less helpful in other cases because they're not specifically targeting, um, or specifically provided for the unique needs of these individuals. In some cases, those services can be unintentionally harmful as well.

So it's very important to just be intentional and think about, you know, the needs and the identities of this group of people. This is why we started InReach. It's in response to the lack of organizations who were aware of this intersection, and these diverse needs, and wanting to make sure that people who, you know—the many people who come here every year, looking for a safe space to be—are able to find services that are safe for them. And recognizing that that's actually really, really challenging to find.

Would you be willing to expand a little bit on the unintentionally harmful services that you had briefly mentioned?

CC: What I mean by unintentionally harmful is sometimes we make decisions based off of our own biases and without recognizing other people's experiences, the experiences they might have. We might make decisions that that cause people to be in situations that might not be comfortable for them. So, for example, we might have people who are, you know—they're going to a place that is accepting of different identities, but doesn't have housing that's available for transgender individuals, for example.

And so people might be offered housing, but maybe it isn't the most comfortable or even safe place for them to be because of their identity. There's other cases where we might assume that a safe place for people to go is somewhere that, uh, has people that speak the same language as them, maybe even from the same country.

And that does sound like it would be helpful at a surface level. But by grouping a bunch of people together from the same place, they might actually be more unsafe because of the reasons that caused them to be persecuted and have to flee their location of origin to begin with.

So it's a very well intentioned effort to make people, uh, feel less isolated, but then leads to further isolation and, again, some potential safety issues.

SM: Thank you so much for expanding on that. Yeah, Abby, I'd love to give any space if you would like to add as well.

AD: Yeah, I think Carissa answered it perfectly. The only thing I would maybe add is: this happens to us a lot while we go to find organizations that are LGBTQ+-affirming, honestly, especially in the immigrant and refugee space. Some organizations that work in general for the refugee community might have some sort of LGBT+-affirming sentence in their description—a pride flag or something, if you will.

But their services do not necessarily reflect that. So of course we talked about housing a lot because that is where safety really comes into play. But you could say the same thing about legal services, mental health, health, medical services, anything really. They don't necessarily seem like they know how to best, for example, create intake forms, um, that are both culturally sensitive but also honor people's individual identities.

So we of course know that a lot of nonprofits, um, everyone's doing great work, but that they tend to be under resourced, and that maybe this is just a gap that folks are overlooking in in certain situations.

SM: Thank you both. Yeah, that is so important, I think: to bring to light the complexity of all of this. And then Carissa, uh, also going back to your mentioning of the 500, it's so important to also recognize that. And obviously, that is a contributor to the lack of research, but then also it's a contributor to a lack of programs. But the 500 is still 500.

And so it's so important to not look past that number for us service providers—to not look past that number and say, oh, that's such a small number of the people who are arriving, but to recognize that that's still 500 people. That's still 500 very complex situations, very complex, uh, you know, backgrounds that these individuals are looking for a safe space. So I think that just calls even more so for a better platform for research to be done, and for our work to continue and, you know, to make sure that service providers know how to provide these safe spaces.

Can you give a practical piece of advice for a case manager who wants to be more inclusive to LGBTQ+ clients? Imagine as someone who's just like, how can I help? How can I do better?

CC: The first thing that I would suggest—and this is very general, general advice, I'm sure your listeners are already very adept at this—but just remember to be patient and compassionate. It's important to take that time to be understanding and to be kind, because it's scary to be in a new place and in a new culture and speaking a new language. And sometimes people react differently than they might expect of themselves, even because of being under a lot of pressure and trying to protect themselves and process, maybe, some trauma that they've experienced.

And so we can easily accidentally misinterpret that without taking the time to just, you know, really be thoughtful and patient and compassionate in these experiences. So that's one very, very general suggestion that I always mention to people.

Another thing is recognize that not all LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers are going to be out. They might not feel comfortable disclosing their identity. They might not conform to concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity that are typical in American culture. And so they might look a little bit different or act a little bit differently than we might expect. I think with that in mind, you know, recognizing that people felt unsafe previously and are, are trying to find a safe space, we can take the time to demonstrate that we are a safe

space even with little gestures. It seems kind of silly, but having those rainbow stickers and stuff, that plants a seed. So if and when someone is ready to share something more personal about their life, they will know that you're somebody that they could go to.

So even little things count, and people do notice those, especially when you're sort of in that space where you're not sure if you're safe or not, and you're looking for clues. InReach also has a bunch of very proactive steps that we recommend for people. There's things like being aware of vulnerabilities, like some of the examples that we shared today. I think hopefully all your, all your listeners will be a little bit more, um, you know, thoughtful about this now because we've been discussing it.

There's other things like using affirming language. And if you're using a translator, making sure that your translators are using affirming language in the language that they're speaking. Do some stuff to rethink what are standard practices that you can start integrating affirming language in—for example, intake forms, you can offer an optional opportunity for people to disclose their gender identity and sexual orientation as a part of a standard practice on an intake form.

A lot of people might not disclose their identity. And that's something to keep in mind. And that's, uh, you know, there are a lot of reasons for that. And we shouldn't try to force anyone to do anything they don't want to do. But recognize that people, uh, may not disclose their identity. And because of that, stories may appear inconsistent sometimes because people feel uncomfortable, you know, really explaining the full truth of their experience. Or maybe they don't even know how to talk about it, which is probably true for a good number of individuals.

It's also important for service providers to be really thoughtful about how to include people, you know, given various marginalization. How do we find identity-appropriate services? And so things for like housing, um, for example, it's important to make sure that transgender people are able to find housing that is safe and comfortable and affirming for them.

And that's something that, you know, there are services out there where people are providing that for transgender individuals, but it's definitely few and far between. It's quite hard to find. So that's something that, uh, service providers may consider.

And the last one for me is just: be careful when you're connecting people to resources. There are a lot of places around the U.S. that, um, sound, you know, at a generic, basic level like they're. generally welcoming to people, but they aren't actually LGBTQ+-affirming. We can see this right now with all of the anti-trans, uh, legislation that's, you know, been all over the news.

There's, uh, you know, there's a lot of fear that people have, and, you know, coming to the U.S. might not be the safe space that many people thought it would be when they arrived. So it's really important to take the time to find safe resources for people. And trust us, we know it's hard to find those safe and affirming resources and services sometimes. So I want to flag that that's the reason that InReach exists, right? We're a website, we're an application, we're a free resource that anyone can use to find safe, legal, medical, mental health, social services that are verified to be welcoming and affirming to LGBTQ+ people facing persecution.

So, you know, one easy thing that you can do is when you're helping someone and they need, you know, they need some assistance finding another service, you can just open up our app and find something in your area that matches what they need.

AD: The only thing I would say is just to touch on the issue of the lack of data. I know Carissa feels this way too. When we do speak to organizations, um, folks report, you know—folks working on the ground, the actual service providers report such a lack of services that they are able to refer clients to, especially housing, for really all LGBTQ+ people but especially TGNC folks.

So we know that while the data might not exist, it is stark. And we also know that trans people are four times more likely than cis people to be victims of violent crimes, which makes, you know, shelter placement extremely necessary. And so it's just crucial for organizations who are LGBTQ+-affirming to make it very clear to

report this on their website, if they have any demographic information about clients that they serve to put that out there to connect to other organizations. Because, you know, in speaking to organizations, people are really, really struggling to find other organizations to refer folks to.

So, of course, that is why InReach exists. And that's what we're here for. But we would love to hear from anyone who does work in this space, of course, to either be added to InReach, or to partner where it might make sense, or also to, you know, start creating more programs, especially in areas where they just frankly don't exist.

Conclusion

SM: Thank you both so much for joining today. And I cannot echo enough: if you are a service provider and you're looking for LGBTQ+ resources for your clients, find them on InReach.Org. They're doing amazing work and they will redirect you to places that are safe and inclusive for your clients. And thank you so much, Abby and Carissa, for joining today.

AD: Thanks for having us.

SM: Thank you. If you're a resettlement service provider and are looking for new ways to improve your current programs or build new programs, please do not hesitate to reach out to the Switchboard team via our website. Please check out our resource library for all of the latest resources on refugee resettlement. We will publish one episode each month throughout the year. Thank you for tuning in. See you next month on the Switchboard podcast.