The Ali Forney Center at 20

Founded in 2002, AFC marks two decades of rehoming LGBTQ youth with new goals.

June 30, 2022 By Jilleen Barrett

The Ali Forney Center (AFC) is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. The New York City–based nonprofit works to protect LGBTQ youth—most of whom do not have a place to live—by housing them and offering them the tools to build an independent life.

AFC was named after Ali Forney, a gender-nonconforming child who was kicked out of his home as a 13-year-old and forced to live on the streets of New York City. After losing friends to street violence—a danger faced by many homeless LGBTQ children—Forney demanded that the New York Police Department take these kids' issues seriously. After Forney was murdered at age 22, Carl Siciliano founded the center in his memory to provide a safe space for 16- to 24-year-olds to cultivate a better future for themselves.

Youth who reach out to the center for help are set up with a case manager, who helps them find a place to live. The center provides a place to sleep, hygienic necessities and three meals a day as well as medical services, such as HIV testing and therapy.

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A post shared by Ali Forney Center (@aliforneycenter)

Zach Cohen, AFC's director of development, has seen firsthand the center's growth since its founding.

"The agency was founded with just six beds in the basement of a church," Cohen said. "And then over these 20 years, it has grown to be this full-service agency that now runs 18 sites throughout New York, provides services to over 2,000 young people and also provides capacity building to smaller agencies that are trying to do this work."

Cohen said that 33 agencies across the country are trying to recreate what AFC has done. People from all over the world travel to New York to learn from AFC, said Erika Usui, the group's director of program evaluation.

"We serve a lot of people from New York City, New York state and the tristate area," Usui said. "But we also serve a lot of young people who come up north from the Bible Belt—they take a bus or train to New York City because they hear that there's a community here. We also serve a lot of people from overseas."

Youth can avail themselves of many services at AFC—particularly health care. The center's services include aid for people living with HIV, which Cohen says is a "critical component" of AFC's work. AFC works with the Institute for Family Health via a subcontract with Care for the Homeless to offer daily testing for HIV and hepatitis C. AFC also offers HIV prevention, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), as well as testing and treatment for other sexually transmitted infections.

One of AFC's latest goals is to buy a townhome for transgender youth located one subway stop away from its drop-in center/medical clinic. This would allow residents to travel quickly to their doctor's appointments. The hope is that the short commute would spare residents the violence or harassment they might have to endure on a longer subway ride. In addition to being a valuable asset, the home would foster community.

"We're looking to purchase a townhome that's very close to the drop-in center so that it becomes

sort of a one-stop shop where transgender people can live in one place to build community and also to get acquainted with transgender specific medical care and HIV prevention care," Usui said.

In the video below, which highlights the campaign to fund this townhome, an AFC client states, "[The center] taught me so much about what it's like to be trans and the struggles and the triumphs of what it's like to have a trans sisterhood."

The center hosts various events to raise money in order to continue to operate. Its next event is the annual Summer Oasis, which has been running for over 10 years and is being held at the Tribeca Rooftop on July 19 at 6:30 p.m.

> OASIS is back in person Tuesday, July 19 at its new home, the beautiful, two-level Tribeca Rooftop at 10 Desbrosses Street! This event raises critical funds for AFC's services including housing, meals, medical and mental health services and more. Tickets: https://t.co/DSt3FDyhVc pic.twitter.com/A7WHOpTD1Z
>
> — Ali Forney Center (@AliForneyCenter) June 28, 2022

"I think it's a difficult time for us as a community where there's so much homophobic and transphobic legislation that is sweeping across the nation, which results in there being real victims—[like] young people getting rejected by their families," Cohen said.

Usui spoke about her favorite annual event—the winter carnival.

"The winter carnival is always very special," Usui said. "Often holidays are a time that's very difficult. People like to spend holidays with their families, and our young people don't have that.

It’s essentially a huge party for young people to feel that they’re at home with us and for them to know that they have a family with us, and so that’s always really special.”

If you’d like to get involved with the center’ day-to-day operations, there are multiple ways to do so. For example, Amazon wish lists detail the needs of residents. You can also volunteer to help with meal preparation, tutoring, event planning, medical assistance and administrative work.

To contact the Ali Forney Center, call 212-206-0574 or visit the office in Harlem at 321 West 125th Street New York, NY 10027.

Want to help, but can’t volunteer? They take donations in various forms through their website.

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