Avenues for Youth program finds safe housing for LGBTQ+ youth

8 youth currently placed in safe housing through ConneQT program, 4 more awaiting host homes

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(SUBMITTED PHOTO)

ConneQT Program Manager Ryan Berg, right, is seated in a moving truck with participants of the safe housing program.

Across the Twin Cities, several LGBTQ+ youth face housing instability due to family rejection, discrimination in traditional shelters, or the need to flee states with limited care accessibility. These individuals are left to endure unsafe living conditions or even surrender to homelessness.

Avenues for Youth's safe housing program, ConneQT, aims to minimize the number of LGBTQ+ youth ages 16-24 who are experiencing housing insecurity by pairing them with host homes that provide basic care needs while allowing them to live authentically.

Originally called GLBT Host Home Program, ConneQT was founded in 1997 by the Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization, YouthLink, and later transferred to Avenues for Youth in 2007. The program continues to build on the history of LGBTQ+ organizing, resistance, and resilience, while upholding its commitment to racial justice and intersectional identities, according to Avenues for Youth.

"Folks in the community were recognizing there were more young people that are queer and trans-identified that were sleeping on the streets than utilizing the services, like shelter, that were available to them due to harassment, violence and discrimination," Program Manager Ryan Berg said. "So the community came together and said, 'What can we do? How can we show up differently for our young folks?' and they did a feasibility study and recognized the host home model could potentially fit for the Twin Cities metro area."

ConneQT purposefully circumvents traditional shelter operations to create a relational and non-institutional program grounded in solidarity, as opposed to charity.

The host home model allows participating LGBTQ+ youth to build a trusting and supportive connection with their host families over time, as the organization believes that healing happens in relationships. Up to 10 young people can receive assistance at a time, allowing for deeper connection building.

The program has several ways to match youth with prospective host families. One technique is "stranger matching," where youth review the applications submitted by host families to determine who they'd like to meet with and potentially live with. If there are no hosts available for a young person, program staff offer to have an informational conversation with a community member of the individual's choosing who may be a good fit for hosting.

A case manager works directly with program participants to identify their personal goals and ways to achieve them. Many of these goals relate to an individual's education, employment, and housing. The program also invites a panel of youth and host families to share their personal experiences with current and prospective program participants.

In addition to helping identify goals, a case manager will ensure that every young person has health insurance; access to mental health services, if needed; legal name changing assistance; schooling and job applications assistance; and sexual and gender health support from the program's partnering agencies, like Family Tree Clinic.

Families that have chosen to temporarily take in a LGBTQ+ youth in need of housing without the use of ConneQT may also use the program's services to help transition a youth into their next phase of stability.

Berg acts as a support for host families. He explained that hosts must complete 16 hours of training, where they learn about homelessness, positive development, trauma, resiliency, and how to be inclusive and affirming for trans and non-binary folks.

Berg shared that 100% of participating youth have transitioned out of the program into stable housing. When asked why the program hasn't expanded to allow for more youth to be helped at a time, Berg explained that it is to preserve the highly-valued relational aspect of the experience and to avoid replicating a foster care system.

"We just know that relational piece matters so much," Berg said. "So we do keep it small by design and non-institutional by design, so youth feel that they're in a home and that they can build trust and support, they can turn to the host, they can turn to our staff, to kind of walk through some of the more challenging moments of their lives."

LGBTQI+ youth are more than twice as likely to experience homelessness as their peers, according to Avenues for Youth, and having at least one consistent and caring adult reduces suicide risk in youth by 40%.

In 2023, Minnesota became a 'trans refuge' state after a law was passed that prevents other states from interfering with gender affirming healthcare in Minnesota. With an influx of out-of-state LGBTQ+ youth in need of housing, ConneQT began assisting individuals from other states, including Alabama and Iowa.

The demand for safe housing across the metro has gradually increased and available host families are needed now more than ever. The program's average wait time to receive housing assistance is currently three months.

Currently, eight youth have found safe housing with assistance from ConneQT, while four more await host families. The program works with host homes in cities as far out as Rogers and currently has youth living with host families in Minnetonka. Historically, families in Eden Prairie have hosted youths in their homes, but currently no Eden Prairie residents participate in the program.

"The ask from our hosts is food and shelter, and then we provide the wraparound services and additional supports," Berg said. "So, it's a volunteer program."

The average time spent in a host home is approximately one year, but prospective host families are asked about their personal capacity prior to arranging the youth's stay. Program staff regularly check in with both host families and youth participants to ensure everyone's needs are being met.

ConneQT also accepts referrals while recruiting host homes to reduce youth wait times.

ABOUT AVENUES FOR YOUTH

Avenues for Youth is a nonprofit 501©3 established in 1993 that assists youth experiencing homelessness. For more than 30 years, Avenues has offered support to youth, ages 16-24, across the Twin Cities through site-based shelter, transitional living, host homes and more. In addition to helping youth secure housing, Avenues helps them build trusting relationships and pursue their own goals in education, employment, health and well-being.

If interested in applying to be a host home for a youth in crisis, visit avenuesforyouth.org or call 612-345-8445.

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Polar Plunge set for March 14 in Eden Prairie

The Eden Prairie Polar Plunge will return Saturday, March 14, at Riley Lake, raising money for Special Olympics Minnesota through the Law Enforcement Torch Run. Registration begins at 10:30 a.m., with plunging scheduled to start at noon at Riley Lake Park, 9180 Riley Lake Road, Eden Prairie.

The event marks the 19th year Eden Prairie has hosted a Polar Plunge. Last year, 551 participants raised $176,650, pushing the city's total fundraising to more than $2.3 million. As of early 2026, 265 people have registered and raised $31,617 online. Eden Prairie police staff will participate as the "Subzero Heroes" team.

The Polar Plunge is organized locally as part of the Law Enforcement Torch Run, which supports Special Olympics athletes worldwide. Minnesota ranks as the second-highest-grossing Torch Run program globally. Food trucks and bonfires will be available for participants and spectators.

For more information and to register, visit plungemn.org/events/eden-prairie.

South Lake Minnetonka Mayors Forum set for Feb. 26

The South Lake Minnetonka Mayors Forum is coming up at 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 26 at the Shorewood Community & Event Center, 5735 Country Club Road, Shorewood.

The free event, hosted by the League of Women Voters South Tonka, is open to the public. The mayors or representatives from Shorewood, Tonka Bay, Excelsior, Greenwood and Deephaven will provide a panel discussion regarding South Tonka.