

New rules outline employee rights as county honors Transgender Day of Visibility

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Board votes on rules protecting transgender employees

As people nationwide this week celebrate [Transgender Day of Visibility](http://www.transstudent.org/tdov) (<http://www.transstudent.org/tdov>) to mark the contributions and lives of transgender leaders, neighbors, friends and family, Multnomah County is releasing new rules to assure county employees work in a welcoming place.

The rules define employer obligations and employee protections in a [Gender Identity and Gender Expression Harassment and Discrimination-Free Workplace](http://multco.us/file/23797/download) (<http://multco.us/file/23797/download>). Those rules include the right to be referred to by the name an employee chooses; to go by the pronouns that align with their gender identity; and to have official records reflect those changes.

The rules underscore [state law, passed in 2007](https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/fs_oregon-equality-) (https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/fs_oregon-equality-

[act_0.pdf](#)), that extends protection from discrimination to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. The move comes after transgender county employees provided feedback on their experiences.

Chair Deborah Kafoury, speaking last week as the board honored the achievements of transgender residents, said it's an important time to clearly define what kind of employer the county wants to be.

"When directives from the top of the county are saying, 'It's okay to discriminate against people who don't have the proper documentation, against people who don't look like me, who don't love the way I love' - any time we get the chance to say, 'every member of our community is wonderful,' that's the only way we're going to be able to fight the discrimination coming at us," she said. "Before we can take a stand publicly, we need to look inside our own organization."

In November 2015, Chair [Kafoury directed](#) (<https://commons.multco.us/wednesday-wire/news/names-we-go-county-embraces-trans-inclusive-policies-practices>) county human resources and the [Office of Diversity and Equity](#) (<http://multco.us/diversity-equity>) (ODE) to develop recommendations that would address the concerns of transgender employees.

Scotty Sherington, an advisor with ODE, led the charge. ODE organized a dozen employees from across the county, nine of whom identify as transgender. For more than a year, the work group met to discuss everything from business attire to medical leave benefits. As a result:

- Employees have a right to use the names and pronouns that fit their gender identity. A deliberate failure to use the proper name or pronouns will be considered a violation of county code.
- Transgender employees have a right to use the bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their gender identity and to wear the clothes that correspond to their gender identity.
- The county will change official records, such as county email, photo ID and payroll, to reflect the person's gender identity. And employees may use sick time and medical leave when undergoing treatment as part of gender transition. That may include treatments such as counseling, hormone therapy or electrolysis.
- Any employee who feels they are being treated unfairly can also submit a complaint of discrimination, harassment or retaliation to any supervisor, the Department of Human Resources or the Office of Diversity and Equity. Complaints can be made in writing, or verbally.

"We elevated the voices that tend to be underrepresented," Sherington said. "For leadership to take that guidance from that group of folks was really empowering."

Travis Graves, director of Human Resources, said it was difficult to hear employees describe feeling unwelcome. "It was sad, to be honest," he said. "It made me see a disconnect that I didn't know was there."

But he said he's grateful for the group's honesty, and the recommendations they brought forward.

"The outcome is exactly what we were hoping to do, to be clear about how people should be treated in the workplace," Graves said. "I think it's been a fantastic collaborative process to ensure the county has all the policies and practices in place to support our employees who are transitioning."

The County's public support of transgender employees was one of the reasons Tash Shatz wanted to work here. They were hired on last year after working as an LGBTQ advocate for Bradley Angle House and Basic Rights Oregon, Shatz joined the Youth and Family Services team in the Department of County Human Services to continue the work. The county already had a reputation as a [welcoming place](http://multco.us/benefits/gender-affirming-benefit-resources) (<http://multco.us/benefits/gender-affirming-benefit-resources>), with a trans-inclusive healthcare policy and all-gender restrooms.

But as Shatz would learn, some transgender employees didn't feel supported, and they weren't sure who to turn to for help. Shatz joined the workgroup to make sure all transgender employees received the support they need, whether that meant transitioning medically or sharing their gender identity with coworkers.

"You don't do good work when you're afraid or disrespected. Imagine if people called you a man, when you're a woman; or called you by the wrong name," Shatz said. "If you want a productive workforce, basic respect isn't too much to ask."

Shatz said they realize not everyone understands, or is comfortable, with people who identify as transgender. But everyone can be respectful. After all, everyone who works for the county commits to service.

“We’re all public servants. That’s what I signed up for when I took this job,” Shatz said. “I work for all communities, regardless of whether I’m part of that community, understand that community or agree with that community.”

At the March 23 board meeting, Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson reflected on proposals across the country to roll back rights extended to transgender people -- more than 100 proposals so far this year. The state of Texas, for example, will consider banning transgender people from using bathrooms that match their gender identity. Other proposals would block transgender people from changing their gender on driver’s licenses, birth certificates or passports.

“I’m so glad in this state and in this county we can offer a different narrative,” she said.

[Commissioner Lori Stegmann](http://multco.us/commissioner-stegmann) (<http://multco.us/commissioner-stegmann>) said she’s working to learn the terminology and become a strong ally of trans residents. “As a cisgender person, it’s a new way of thinking,” she said, referring to herself by the term used for gender-conforming people. “But it’s so important we honor everyone in our community.”

The national Transgender Day of Visibility began in 2009, a decade after the transgender community began Transgender Day of Remembrance to honor people killed each year. So far [this year, eight people](http://www.advocate.com/crime/2017/3/22/woman-killed-baltimore-eighth-trans-murder-victim-2017) (<http://www.advocate.com/crime/2017/3/22/woman-killed-baltimore-eighth-trans-murder-victim-2017>) have been murdered nationwide, all of them trans women of color.

[Commissioner Sharon Meieran](http://multco.us/commissioner-meieran) (<http://multco.us/commissioner-meieran>) said that, as an emergency room doctor, she sees trans people come in fearful; not only of the health crisis they are experiencing, “but from this added burden of stress and trauma and fear of being discriminated against, even in a place they should be getting help.”

“Visibility is a challenging concept, when being visible can mean danger or even death,” Brook Shelly, co-chair of the board of directors for Basic Rights Oregon, told the board. “While being out and visible isn’t always safe, we encourage those who can to fight for our rights. We ask that non trans speak up and fight when we are unable to.”

Commissioner Loretta Smith asked the panel to continue recommending ways the board can help the local trans community “feel safe, welcomed, supported. If there’s anything else we should do, please let us know.”

Neola Young, a community advocate, had a few ideas on that.

“Hire us. Promote us. Love us. Welcome us into your houses. Include your statehouses. Elect us. Have us in those chairs,” Young said, pointing to the dais. “Call us in, celebrate us.”

Tips & Tools

Workplace

[Ideas about how to support transgender coworkers](http://transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/forcoworkers.pdf) (<http://transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/forcoworkers.pdf>).

[Advice for being an ally](http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies) (<http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>).

[Study lays out the challenges transgender workers face](http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/a-broken-bargain-for-transgender-workers.pdf) (<http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/a-broken-bargain-for-transgender-workers.pdf>), including higher unemployment, lower wages and discrimination.

Pronouns

[Primer](https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/) (<https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>) helps novice LGBTQ allies understand gender-neutral pronouns and how to correct their mistakes (because we're human!).

[Question](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gender-neutral-pronouns-when-they-doesnt-identify-as-either-male-or-female/2014/10/27/41965f5e-5ac0-11e4-b812-38518ae74c67_story.html?utm_term=.b5f26f98c7cd) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gender-neutral-pronouns-when-they-doesnt-identify-as-either-male-or-female/2014/10/27/41965f5e-5ac0-11e4-b812-38518ae74c67_story.html?utm_term=.b5f26f98c7cd) offers a thoughtful response and a history lesson.

[Story](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/education/edlife/a-university-recognizes-a-third-gender-neutral.html?_r=0) (https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/education/edlife/a-university-recognizes-a-third-gender-neutral.html?_r=0) shows how one institution began recognizing “They”.

Health

[Study focuses on the extraordinarily high suicide rates of transgender people](http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf) (<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf>).

[Study shows how discrimination plays a role in high suicide rates](http://www.thetaskforce.org/injustice-every-turn-report-national-transgender-discrimination-survey/) (<http://www.thetaskforce.org/injustice-every-turn-report-national-transgender-discrimination-survey/>).

[Event](https://tdor.info/) (<https://tdor.info/>) honors the transgender people who have been killed around the world.

Local

[Northwest Gender Alliance](http://www.nwgenderalliance.org/) (<http://www.nwgenderalliance.org/>) hosts events, support groups and forums.

[Q Center](https://www.pdxqcenter.org/transgender-community) (<https://www.pdxqcenter.org/transgender-community>) hosts events, support groups and maintains a list of resources.

[Basic Rights](https://www.basicrights.org/transgender-justice) (<https://www.basicrights.org/transgender-justice>) advocates for legal protections for transgender citizens.