

# Colleen Becoming

Finding the Shoe that Fits

*A story of transitioning at 82,  
a love beyond gender,  
and the joy of finding the perfect pair of shoes.*

**EDUCATIONAL  
RESOURCE FOR  
AGEING, AGED  
CARE AND  
HEALTH SERVICES  
SUPPORTING OLDER  
PEOPLE.**



# Colleen

Becoming

Finding the Shoe that Fits

*"BECOMING COLLEEN: Finding the Shoe that Fits"* is a documentary about Colleen Young, an 85 year old transgender woman, living in the coastal community of Coffs Harbour on the NSW mid-north coast. Colleen transitions in her 80s, just prior to entering residential aged care and the film documents Colleen's journey to live and be loved as her "true self".

The documentary outlines a range of issues experienced by Colleen as she transitions, and it provides an ideal educational vehicle for reflective practice for ageing, aged care and health service providers working with older people, in how they would support an older trans or gender diverse person such as Colleen.



This resource aims to explore some of the themes and issues that emerge in the film and to guide discussion and outcomes for trans inclusive health, ageing and aged care. The resource provides a range of good practice or educational pathways for services to proactively develop their awareness and improve their knowledge and capacity to provide safe, welcoming and inclusive services to older trans and gender diverse people.

# TRANS & GENDER DIVERSE SERVICE USERS

Often service providers may not be aware that trans or gender diverse consumers are accessing their services (as the person may not have disclosed to the service). However, with trans and gender diverse people estimated to be 1% - 2% of the population, it is almost inevitable that at some point a trans or gender diverse person will access your service.

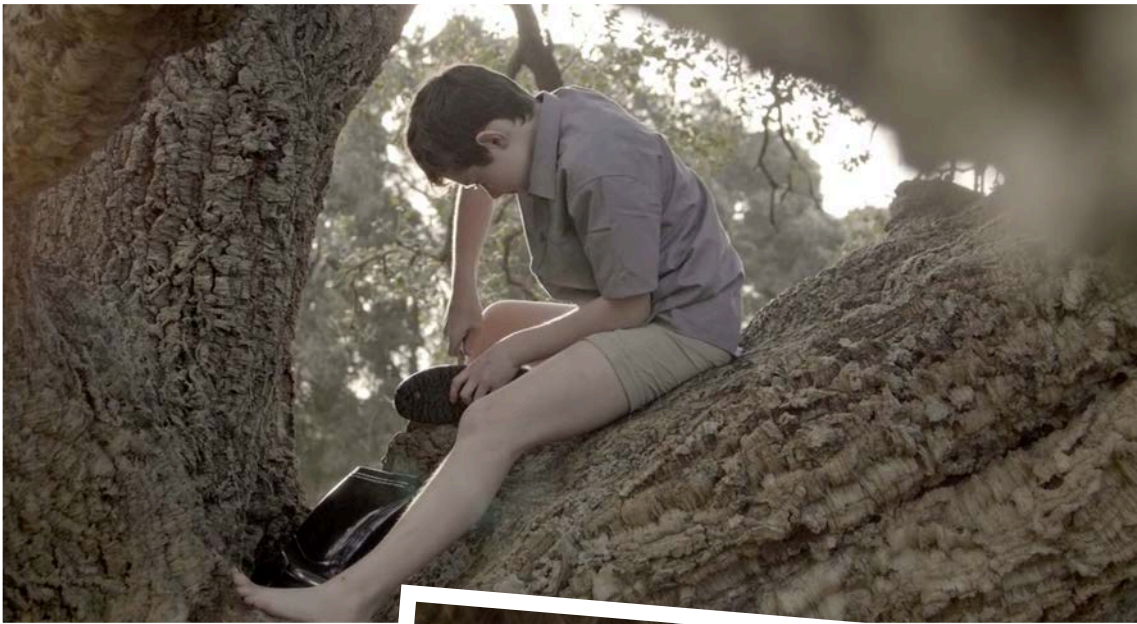
Service providers who are aware of and educated around the range of issues faced by trans and gender diverse people and how to respond to these (such as outlined throughout this resource), are better placed to provide safe, welcoming and inclusive care and service delivery.



***“It would mean so much to me to  
be able to be what I want to be”  
- Colleen***



## USING THIS RESOURCE



Please watch the film (full length or condensed) and use the information outlined in this resource to not only guide discussion but to develop professional practice outcomes in order to provide safe, affirming and supportive services to older trans or gender diverse people who may access care and support.



# THEMES & ISSUES

1. History of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex) discrimination and social stigma
2. Understanding gender, sex and sexuality
3. Affirmation of gender identity
4. Language including pronouns
5. Aspects of ageing and access to care
6. Education, service development and advocacy

*i. Further information, resources and referrals*



# 1. HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL STIGMA

As an older person, Colleen has lived through a period in Australia of profound social stigma and discrimination for people who identified as trans or gender diverse. Colleen describes knowing from a very early age that she identified as female, however we also sense that she knew to hide this. While she mentions it to her mother she also knows of her father's disapproval:

*"When I was a youngster, I always used to ask my mum if I could be a girl...I daren't mention it to my father. Otherwise, I got a clip over the head."*

Colleen hides the "girls" shoes that she makes in the tree, and as a young adult, after buying some ballet slippers, is extremely cautious to ensure no-one sees her secretly wearing them in the theatre projection room.

She is told by doctors (as a younger person) it is something she will grow out of, and we are also aware that she has experienced anxiety and depression throughout her life which resulted in hospitalisation and a range of "therapies".



The historical legacy of discrimination and social stigma is impacting her experience of ageing – in care she is now fearful and feels judged. It also influenced interactions in the retirement village, as Denise outlines "they turn a blind eye", and many people disappear from her life (after she transitions).

In order to maintain family connection, it appears that Colleen accepts less than full acceptance from her family members.

When Colleen enters residential aged care she is fearful and doesn't want to go back into the closet, becoming depressed, suicidal, withdrawn, and feeling "stifled" and judged. Other residents "don't appreciate" her and laugh at her and make fun of her clothes. No one affirms her gender by using her correct name, Colleen and her correct pronouns.



# 1. HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL STIGMA



***“When I was a youngster, I always used to ask my mum if I could be a girl...”***



## DISCUSS

### A.

Why do you believe even as a young person, Colleen was so guarded and was aware “it” was “a problem” and something she had to hide?

### B.

Although we now live in better times regarding awareness and acceptance of trans and gender diverse people, how do you believe history has impacted her transition and her experiences of ageing, support and aged care services?

### C.

What do you believe it means to be trans inclusive, and how do you assess the ability of your service – what are you doing now and what else might you do to be trans inclusive?

# 1. HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL STIGMA



## DO

- Develop an understanding of the impact of historical discrimination and social stigma - read: *We're people first - trans health and ageing, an evidence based guide to inclusive services*, J.R. Latham & Catherine Barrett, October 2015
- Schedule regular opportunities to improve professional practice and source resources, case studies and information to ensure ongoing education to be a trans and gender diverse informed, responsive and inclusive provider.



## 2. UNDERSTANDING GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

In order to provide support and inclusive practice to trans and gender diverse people it is important to be aware that gender identity and expression differs from sex and sexuality.

A number of times throughout the film, people, in discussing Colleen's gender identity, confuse gender identity and sexuality:

- The son, John refers to "Dad's sexuality"
- The aged care provider talks about people being born a little later [residents] might have felt differently about their sexuality; also talks about diverse sexuality.



## 2. UNDERSTANDING GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY



### DISCUSS

**A.** Why do you think it might be important to understand and acknowledge that gender identity and expression differs from sex and sexuality?

## 2. UNDERSTANDING GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

### DO

- Take the opportunity to access education and resources to assist in understanding trans, gender identity and gender expression, and how gender identity differs from sexuality. Develop knowledge including terminology and language to assist in the delivery of services to the diverse LGBTI community.

Download The Victorian LGBTIQ Inclusive Language Guide describes gender and sexuality as follows:

### GENDER

*is part of how you understand who you are and how you interact with other people. Many people understand their gender as being female or male. Some people understand their gender as a combination of these or neither. Gender can be expressed in different ways, such as through behaviour or physical appearance.*

### SEX

*refers to a person's biological sex characteristics. This has historically been understood as either female or male. However, we now know that some people are born with natural variations to sex characteristics.*

### SEXUALITY

*or sexual orientation describes a person's romantic and/or sexual attraction to others. A person's gender does not necessarily mean they have particular sex characteristics or a particular sexuality, or vice versa.*





## 2. UNDERSTANDING GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

### DO

- Download The Victorian LGBTIQ Inclusive Language Guide, or another trans or LGBTI language guide for more information and to further develop knowledge and awareness regarding trans and gender diverse inclusive language and communication, terminology and more.



- Be proactive – don't rely on trans and gender diverse consumers to be the educators. Organise an education session for your service – consider the Silver Rainbow Aged Care Training which is provided throughout Australia (find under Organisations in Further information, resources and referrals) or explore other education and training opportunities (contact trans and gender organisations, also listed in Further information, resources and referrals) to develop a greater awareness of the experiences and needs of trans and gender diverse identities, language, experiences and needs (as well as older LGBTI people more broadly).

### 3. AFFIRMATION OF GENDER IDENTITY



At aged 82 Colleen begins to publicly affirm her female gender identity. Early in the film we learn that Colleen knew from a very early age that she wanted to be a girl. Just as young Colleen did, many trans and gender diverse people describe knowing from a very early age of being trans or gender diverse.

It is important to know that people can transition at any age and may have, like Colleen, spent a lifetime hiding. In addition, trans and gender diverse people may affirm or express their gender identity in a multitude of ways. For Colleen we learn that surgery was an important consideration and factor in her expression and affirmation of her true self and identity, however this is not the case for all trans and gender diverse people:

*"It's very hard wanting to be female when you're a male. You have to hide your reactions and your feelings a lot. Just how I managed to do that, I don't quite know. There's such a hatred against transgenderism, at my age, my vintage. It would mean so much to me, to be able to be what I want to be, to have all the bits and pieces that I want. I'd like to be able to be a total woman. If I passed away under that sort of surgery, I'd go quite happily because I'd be going the way I want to be."*

We also learn that due to Colleen's age and health, the surgery she very much wanted was not possible. In working with older people it is important to consider a range of ways to affirm gender expressions and identity that may be easily accessible. For some older trans and gender diverse people in similar situations to Colleen, assistance with aspects such as personal grooming can be very important. Colleen was provided with a range of ways to support and affirm her gender - and we see how important clothes and shoes were to her, and the way that her spirits were lifted when the beautician visits to do her hair, nails and make-up.

### 3. AFFIRMATION OF GENDER IDENTITY



## DISCUSS

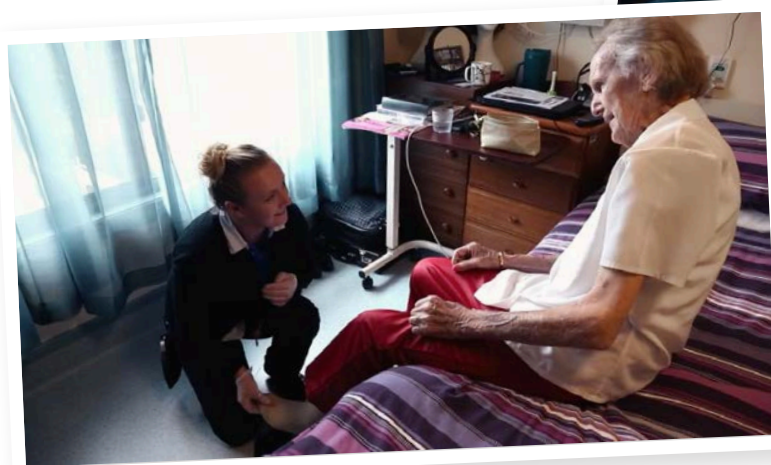
- A.** Other than surgery, how was Colleen supported to be *"her true self"*?
- B.** Considering the services or support that you provide, discuss how you would support an older trans or gender diverse person accessing your services to be their *"true self"*?
- C.** What information would you and your service need in order to provide trans and gender diverse inclusive services, and how would you access this?
- D.** Did you identify any instances where Colleen's identity was not affirmed? If so, as a service provider how would you have advocated for Colleen?



### 3. AFFIRMATION OF GENDER IDENTITY

#### DO

- As part of person-centred care, ensure trans and gender diverse consumers are involved in making decisions about what is important to them. Just as you would with any consumer, assist trans and gender diverse consumers with aspects of health, wellbeing, personal care and grooming and what is important to them.



## 4. LANGUAGE (INCLUDING PRONOUNS)



An important aspect of affirming someone's identity is use of the person's name, pronouns, and inclusive language and terminology. Throughout the film we witness a range of approaches.

A number of individuals in the film affirm Colleen's identity with their use of her name and female pronouns, while some struggle and continue to use the male name, roles and pronouns when talking about Colleen. (When someone uses the person's name before their transition we call that using their "dead name" or "birth name").

We see some aspects of good practice in the film (the social worker, the GP) and genuine attempts at moving to inclusive, affirming practice - Denise her neighbour (she even corrects herself), and Pippa the nurse manager (except for the continued use of Col). We also witness those who are completely unaware or disregard the importance of affirming Colleen through the language they use, continuing the use of male gendered pronouns (he/him) as well Col, and gendered roles (e.g. dad).

## 4. LANGUAGE (INCLUDING PRONOUNS)



### DISCUSS

- A.** Why do you think using a person's correct name and their pronouns is important?
- B.** Reflect on the language that family, friends and supporters used throughout the film and in their interactions with Colleen. What do you believe are the positive and negative implications for a trans and gender diverse person such as Colleen?
- C.** Why do you think some continued to use her "dead name", pronouns and roles?
- D.** As a service provider what would you do to support Colleen or a trans or gender diverse person in this situation/in your service?
- E.** If you were in a conversation with someone and they used incorrect pronouns or language to describe Colleen (or a trans or gender diverse consumer, staff member or volunteer), what would you do?
- F.** What do you believe are the range of issues that contributed to the incorrect use of pronouns or language to describe Colleen?



## 4. LANGUAGE (INCLUDING PRONOUNS)

### DO

- Ensure staff in your service are aware that the correct use of pronouns is important! Personal pronouns such as she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, are used by everyone to affirm one's gender identity.

For most cisgender (see recommended language guide for definitions) people they have their gender affirmed from people using their correct pronouns their whole life and never need to think about it.

For many trans people having their gender identity affirmed from people switching pronouns, such as in Colleen's life from he to her, has a powerful positive impact.

An easy way for your service to demonstrate it is trans inclusive is for staff to understand the importance of pronouns and perhaps wear a pronoun badge.



This simple visible marker can demonstrate you understand the positive impact of respecting someone's pronouns and that a person's pronouns cannot be assumed. Importantly it also sends a message of welcome to trans and gender diverse consumers. Wearing a pronoun badge can also be a great conversation starter about trans-inclusion with other service users and staff.

- Ensure service documentation such as forms are trans inclusive. Review data collection documentation to ensure good practice including asking all people what pronouns they use.
- Access and watch pronoun videos and utilise the resources listed in Further information, resources and referrals to enhance education and the development of good practice in your service.

## 5. ASPECTS OF AGEING AND ACCESS TO CARE

Following Heather's passing, (Colleen's wife), Colleen transitions and while this is a positive in her life, we also begin to see a decline in her overall health and wellbeing. We learn that throughout their life together, Heather has long affirmed Colleen's gender identity and expression, and has provided companionship and a no doubt a sense of safety and security. Together with her passing, we witness increased isolation in Colleen's life, culminating in falls, panic attacks, health issues and hospitalisations. Denise tells us people disappeared from Colleen's life, others in the retirement village "turn a blind eye" and generally don't know "why at this stage in life" someone would transition.

When Colleen is admitted to residential aged care, the social worker tells us Colleen is really concerned and doesn't want to have to go "*back into the closet*". She is also very fearful of "*coming out to staff*" and also being judged by other residents. The nurse manager discloses that "*Col*" is anxious and on suicide watch, and "*it's a trying time for staff*". One of the residents who has befriended "*Col*" tried to help "*him*" and was OK with "*that*". Colleen's granddaughter says that her dad "*supports him*" [Colleen]. The GP says that as a small regional community we have a "*long way to go to accept these people*" and that they are "*not freaks*".



## 5. ASPECTS OF AGEING AND ACCESS TO CARE

### DISCUSS

- A.** In what ways has Heather's passing impacted Colleen's life?
- B.** We know that social isolation is a contributing factor for a range of ageing issues. As a service provider, how might you have supported Colleen after Heather died to hopefully help her remain living in the retirement village and in the community?
- C.** Once Colleen enters residential aged care, what are her concerns and what do you believe are some of the issues that may be impacting her life?
- D.** What would you do to ensure Colleen's experience in residential aged care was inclusive, and how would you have supported staff and residents to provide safe, welcoming and inclusive services?





## 5. ASPECTS OF AGEING AND ACCESS TO CARE

### DO

- Provide a genuine message of welcome to LGBTI people who may be accessing your service. Identify ways to communicate that your service is LGBTI safe and welcoming (website, brochures, posters, rainbow and/or trans pins or lanyards etc.) in order to support safe access and build the confidence of LGBTI people requiring service support. It is very important however to ensure that if you are genuinely communicating that your service is LGBTI inclusive, that every aspect of the service is LGBTI aware and inclusive. This ensures that LGBTI people accessing your service will actually receive the culturally safe and inclusive service and support that you are communicating.

- In shared service environments (residential aged care, social support programs and activities etc.) ensure all service users/clients/residents are aware that all people, including LGBTI people are welcome and that the service requires respectful communication.

- Identify opportunities to communicate to both staff and other service users that diversity is valued, celebrated and welcomed – include some LGBTI inclusive activities, films, and books in your program.

- Research what trans and gender diverse support organisations are available in your area (also see Organisations in Further information, resources and referrals)

- For many trans and gender diverse people who feel isolated, being connected to community can be incredibly affirming. Linking them to an LGBTI Community Visitors Program (see Further information, resources and referrals for ideas) can be life changing.

## 6. EDUCATION, SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY

Throughout the film we can identify a multitude of ways in which education and advocacy would have improved outcomes and inclusive service provision for Colleen. Aged care service providers in Australia regardless of location are required to provide LGBTI inclusive and responsive service provision, and must advocate on behalf of each consumer.

While the social worker provided some basic education to the aged care facility, they could have also accessed LGBTI specific aged care education and resources through the National LGBTI Health Alliance Silver Rainbow Program – available to aged care service providers nationally. In addition the Department of Health National Aged Care Diversity Framework and Actions to Support LGBTI Elders (LGBTI Action Plan) can help guide and structure LGBTI inclusion.



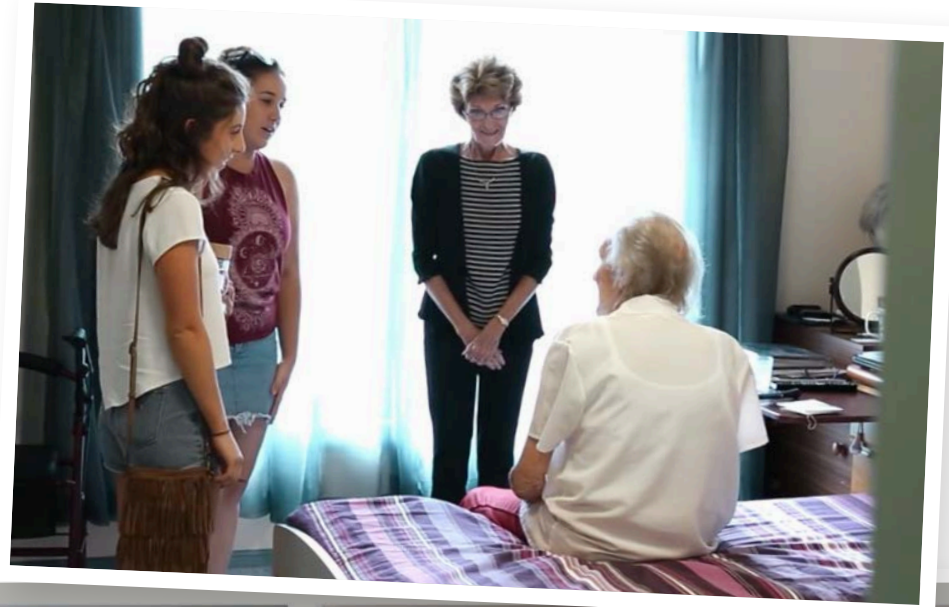
Service providers can access a range of other programs and frameworks (e.g. Rainbow Tick Standards and/or accreditation) to guide their capacity to be LGBTI inclusive (see Further information, resources and referrals).

Proactive education and LGBTI inclusive service development would have enabled the service to have trans inclusive policies, procedures and practices to address or mitigate some of the issues Colleen encountered – such as misgendering, naming, reaction by residents and staff. While the service and a range of individuals no doubt attempted to provide safe and supporting care to Colleen, much more could have occurred.

## 6. EDUCATION, SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY

### DISCUSS

- A.** How would you have advocated on behalf of Colleen to support her to be her true self including with staff, other service users and also with her family?
- B.** How do you/would you communicate to other residents, staff and service users that transphobic (and homophobic, biphobic and intersexist) behaviour and comments are unacceptable in your service, and how do you/would you model appropriate behaviour?





## 6. EDUCATION, SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY

### DO

- Download the Aged Care Diversity Framework and Actions to Support LGBTI Elders (LGBTI Action Plan) - see Further information, resources and referrals.
- Develop an LGBTI inclusive action plan for your service - utilise the Rainbow Tick Audit Tool (see Further information, resources and referrals) to identify current practice and opportunities for LGBTI inclusive service development. Use the LGBTI inclusive action plan to guide service change and inclusive practice.
- Develop inclusive intake or access pathways to ensure (regardless of someone's identity documentation), that people are not misgendered by staff/other service users/organisations, and their identity and name are affirmed.





*i. Further information, resources and referrals]*

## ORGANISATIONS

*Organisations listed below provide a range of information, referral pathways and resources to assist with the support and care of trans and gender diverse people, and LGBTI people broadly:*

### Alice's Garage

Alice's Garage is a social enterprise empowering LGBTI Elders. It draws on their knowledge and skills to address the challenges they face and build communities where LGBTIphobia and ageism are addressed. Includes the trans and gender diverse project 'Kinfolk' and links to useful resources.

[www.alicesgarage.net/](http://www.alicesgarage.net/)

### Monash Health Gender Clinic

Victorian based gender clinic includes comprehensive list of organisations and resources to support trans and gender diverse people  
[www.monashhealth.org/services/services-f-n/gender-clinic/resources/](http://www.monashhealth.org/services/services-f-n/gender-clinic/resources/)

### National LGBTI Health Alliance

The national peak health organisation in Australia for organisations and individuals that provide health-related programs, services and research focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people (LGBTI) and other sexuality, gender, and bodily diverse people and communities.

[www.lgbtihealth.org.au](http://www.lgbtihealth.org.au)

### Rainbow Health Victoria

Rainbow Health Victoria (RHV) is a program that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) health and wellbeing through research and knowledge translation, training, resources, policy advice and service accreditation through the Rainbow Tick. RHV is located within the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University and is funded by the Victorian government.

[www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/](http://www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/)

*i.Further information, resources and referrals]*

## ORGANISATIONS

*Organisations listed below provide a range of information, referral pathways and resources to assist with the support and care of trans and gender diverse people, and LGBTI people broadly:*

### Silver Rainbow

Silver Rainbow provides national coordination and support activities promoting the well-being of LGBTI elders and the delivery of LGBTI awareness training to the aged care sector.

[www.lgbtihealth.org.au/ageing/](http://www.lgbtihealth.org.au/ageing/)

### Switchboard Victoria

Switchboard Victoria is a community-based not for profit organisation that provides a peer based, volunteer run support service for LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people and their friends, families and allies. Also includes an LGBTQI community visitors program.

[www.switchboard.org.au/](http://www.switchboard.org.au/)

### The Gender Centre

The Gender Centre is the peak state-wide specialist multi-purpose service supporting the transgender, gender diverse and gender questioning population of NSW. A range of information includes support, training and referral, and comprehensive links to other organisations and service providers throughout Australia.

[www.gendercentre.org.au/resources](http://www.gendercentre.org.au/resources)

### Transgender Victoria

TGV is Victoria's leading body for trans and gender diverse advocacy, working to achieve justice, equity and inclusive service provision for trans and gender diverse people, their partners, families and friends.

[www.transgendervictoria.com/](http://www.transgendervictoria.com/)

*i.Further information, resources and referrals]*

## ORGANISATIONS

*Organisations listed below provide a range of information, referral pathways and resources to assist with the support and care of trans and gender diverse people, and LGBTI people broadly:*

### Val's LGBTI Ageing & Aged Care

Val's is a program of Rainbow Health Victoria. It is a Victorian state-wide program working to improve healthy ageing pathways, care and visibility of older LGBTI people. Working directly with service providers we facilitate a network of individuals and organisations to foster an understanding of the histories and experiences of older LGBTI people, and how these may impact access to services and care.

[www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/vals](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/vals)

### Zoe Belle Gender Collective

Zoe Belle Gender Collective (ZBGC) is a trans and gender diverse led advocacy organisation based in Victoria. [www.zbgc.org.au/](http://www.zbgc.org.au/)

### Community Visitor Programs (CVS)

List and links to the current CVS Auspices providing LGBTI specific services.

[www.agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/cvs-auspices-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-intersex-contact-details](http://www.agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/cvs-auspices-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-intersex-contact-details)



*i.Further information, resources and referrals]*

## OTHER RESOURCES

*Other useful resources and information can be found on the websites of the organisations listed in this resource.*

### Department of Health Aged Care

National Aged Care Diversity Framework including Actions to Support LGBTI Elders (LGBTI Action Plan).

[www.agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/aged-care-diversity-framework](http://www.agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/aged-care-diversity-framework)

### Pronoun video

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wei5oUa2eRU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wei5oUa2eRU)

### Rainbow Tick Standards

(including guide and audit tool)

<http://www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/rainbow-tick>

### References

*"We're people first - trans health and ageing, and evidence based guide to inclusive services"*

J.R. Latham & Catherine Barrett, October 2015.

[www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/health-and-wellbeing/lgbti-ageing-and-aged-care/resources-reports-and-training](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/health-and-wellbeing/lgbti-ageing-and-aged-care/resources-reports-and-training)

*"LGBTIQ Language Guide"*

Victorian Equality Branch, 2019.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusive-language-guide>





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