

Transgender Oklahomans Sound Off on the Difficulties Created by the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Syd Stephenson

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The Covid-19 Pandemic has transformed the lives of hundreds of millions of people across the world in 2020, with exacerbated hardships for transgender people in politically conservative states like Oklahoma due to regressive social policies. An abrupt halt to necessary resources, isolation from fellow transgender peers, and having to move back in with or spend more time around unsupportive family are just a few of the issues facing transgender people.

As a transgender person, the first several months of the pandemic for me were fraught with added stress, increased gender dysphoria, and insecurities. Spring of 2020 was the final semester of my senior year at the University of Oklahoma, and when the pandemic hit, things went sour very severely and very quickly.

When my university went completely virtual, I lost a significant fraction of my income, although I was lucky that I had not been laid off like many of my classmates. Though my partner has a steady job, we still had many bills to pay and with our income cut significantly, food insecurity and loss of access to their transition care became a big concern. As students, we did not receive the \$1,200 stimulus check.

I saw many of my transgender peers and friends lose their jobs, housing, and all sense of stability. Many Oklahomans were struggling to get their unemployment payments, and this created a scary situation for transgender communities in my home state.

Lack of basic material resources

There is no doubt that transgender people have been especially vulnerable in recent years because of the Trump administration's anti-trans policies. Due to this, combined with a pandemic with over 400,000 deaths, the loss of millions of jobs in 2020, and many organizations and medical centers restricting services, many transgender people have lost access to the basic resources they need to survive and have been left to fend for themselves. These basic resources include income, housing, access to medical care, and access to transgender-specific resources.

Transgender people are already [more likely to have no access to housing or employment](#).ⁱ According to Kiki Pierce, an MPA student in Atlanta, Georgia, with a pandemic ravaging the country and the economy, the situation has likely even become more precarious. "Transgender people experiencing homelessness have [increased 88 percent overall since 2016, with unsheltered homelessness among trans people increasing 113 percent](#)."ⁱⁱ While his term is nearing its end, the Trump Administration's attacks on transgender people is particularly harmful to those facing homelessness, [making it more difficult to access emergency shelter](#)," Pierce noted.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lack of organizational support

On top of losses in financial resources, according to Bailey Hackler, an Oklahoma-based LMSW, organizations that protect transgender people in states that are politically conservative, like Oklahoma, have had to severely limit the services/support they can provide community members.

“Some existing resources include the Diversity Center of Oklahoma, Q Space (part of services offered by Northcare), Oklahomans for Equality, PFLAG, Trust Women, Planned Parenthood Great Plains, and Freedom Oklahoma; however, due to the pandemic, access to these already very limited resources has been wildly restricted leaving trans folks even more vulnerable and alone than we already were,” Hackler said.

These groups give transgender people a sense of community and help fill in the gaps for any assistance that they need. This assistance includes healthcare (specifically mental health care and transition care), community support, and access to housing and food. While it is important to limit the spread of the pandemic, reducing or even cancelling in-person services has left a void for those in transgender communities who are the most in need of the services offered prior to the pandemic.

Lack of community support

Isolation from community has also been a harsh side effect for transgender people. Especially for students like Sam at the University of Oklahoma, isolation mixed with the stresses of online classes has made this year particularly difficult. “I've been lucky enough to avoid most of the financial issues that came with the pandemic, but I rarely leave my apartment anymore and feel more isolated from my community. My anxiety has also been a lot worse, and spending months watching those in power do absolutely nothing and so many people still crowding into bars and refusing to wear masks has made me generally more frustrated and irritable,” Sam said.

Ashley Fellhauer, an Oklahoma-based teacher, says that they have seen their own transgender students struggling because of the lack of socialization with fellow transgender peers during the pandemic. Many students have even had to go back into the closet because of the pandemic and have lost opportunities to socialize with peers they can relate to.

“Trans students don't necessarily see or talk to their identity-affirming friends and peers on a daily or even weekly basis,” Fellhauer said. Loss of access to peers, compounded with being stuck in an unsupportive living situation can make things even more dire for transgender people, particularly young people.

“What's more, I've had a few students confide in me that because of lockdown and time spent away from others this summer, they've come to recognize themselves as trans or gender-nonconforming, but because of the limited social interactions and lack of control over their lives, they haven't been able to live authentically around people they trust and try new ways of gender expression that fit them best,” Fellhauer said. “Many students have been stuck at home with transphobic or ignorant families, and so have stayed in the closet because there is nowhere to escape to during the pandemic.”

Aileen G., an Oklahoma-based graduate student, has also found that she is facing a similar problem of having to go back into the closet after having no choice but to move back in with family. In addition, she has even had to ask friends and classmates to use her deadname.

“Aside from the obvious effects of living in a pandemic, I’ve been forced somewhat back into the closet. Over Zoom meetings with people who would normally call me by my name, I’ve had to ask them to dead name me so my parents would not overhear and find out,” Aileen said. “Additionally, toward the end of 2019, I’d begun looking into more feminine clothing for parties and such. However, all that has fallen to the wayside as I can’t wear such outfits at home.”

Solutions

One of the most important solutions for transgender people who have lost access to valuable resources due to the pandemic is larger, more frequent **stimulus checks**. The one-time \$1,200 check in 2020 and a \$600 check in January of 2021 simply is not enough, [especially since many people did not receive either](#).

Until the pandemic ends and unemployment has decreased dramatically, monthly stimulus checks for all citizens regardless of status are necessary to give transgender people more security. These funds to pay for rent, necessities, and vital transition and support care would have an immediate impact on transgender people who have lost their jobs and structural support.

For transgender people who are suffering because of lack of access to community, [accessible and affordable \(though preferably free\)](#)^{iv} **mental health care and transition care** are also vital resources. When transgender people have access to the care they need, it can vastly improve quality of life, especially when accessing it will not place them in substantive debt.

Lastly, there are many potential solutions available to assist transgender people who have no choice but to live in unsafe and unsupportive situations because of the pandemic. One of the most helpful would be implementing [public policy, like the equality act, that protects transgender people](#)^v from discrimination. This is especially true since situations like the pandemic and loss of resources compound the already-present discrimination and can place transgender people in precarious living situations. “As a start, protections need to be in place to ensure transgender folks are able to exist without fear of being fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, removed from public spaces, and, in more extreme, but very real cases, murdered just for being transgender,” says Bailey Hackler, LMSW.

According to Hackler, less than half of states have comprehensive protections for transgender people within state legislation. Many states, Oklahoma included, have put forth anti-trans bills for the first legislative session of 2021. As such, legislators in states like Oklahoma need to immediately push for resources and protections for transgender residents so that they have safe and supportive housing options.

Amid mass death and the financial hardships brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic, transgender people find themselves in unsupportive, dangerous environments — unable to access communities and institutions they previously relied on. Alleviating this insecurity requires timely public policy which ensures financial security, access to healthcare, and federal protection from

all forms of discrimination. These solutions must be applied quickly to keep transgender people, particularly in politically conservative states like Oklahoma, alive and safe through the pandemic.

ⁱ <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://endhomelessness.org/increases-in-individual-homelessness-a-gender-analysis/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2020/09/03/490004/trump-administrations-latest-attack-transgender-people-facing-homelessness/>

^{iv} <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/worlrevipoliecon.8.1.0082>

^v <https://www.hrc.org/resources/the-equality-act>