

Fighting for Economic Justice in Every LGBT Agenda... because there's no justice for queers without it.

**QUEERS
FOR
ECONOMIC
JUSTICE**

**POVERTY, PUBLIC ASSISTANCE & PRIVATIZATION:
The Queer Case for a New Commitment to Economic Justice**



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Justice isn't about a narrow idea of achieving *gay equality* within a framework of widening racial, gender and economic inequality that renders most of us *not equal*.

Real justice is rooted in principled community relationships, and the idea that in community, we must look out for one another's rights and well-being. So real justice also includes everyone who struggles for basic economic survival, and all of those who must have public support in order to fully exercise their civil rights, including people with disabilities. Real justice honors and actively supports the sovereignty of tribal nations. It fights for the rights of immigrants, including undocumented workers. And real justice connects domestic and global economic justice struggles.

Since the 1980s, there has been a sustained attack on programs of public assistance intended to provide basic economic assistance to poor and low-income people, people with disabilities, and elders, many of whom live on small, fixed incomes.

There has also been a sustained push to *privatize* assistance to those who most need it — that is, to abolish public assistance for those who most need it and replace it with *market-based solutions* that are in the hands of private charities, corporations and large financial institutions. All of this profoundly affects the lives of countless lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Here's why economic justice is a queer issue...

...and why there's no justice for LGBTQ people without economic justice...

...and why we need to fight relentlessly for a new public commitment to economic justice...

What is a Social Contract — And Why Is It Under Attack?

In the 1930s, in response to the Great Depression that threw millions of people and families — and thousands of communities — into poverty, the government created a new social contract with the people, an agreement that public revenue (taxes) would be used, in part, to assist those thrown into poverty.

Help was provided in the form of food, work, fuel, houses, and money. This help was limited and racism governed much of its distribution. And it wasn't enough to take care of all of the basic survival needs. But it provided a lifeline for countless people.

The Social Security program grew from this contract, providing many elders with their only stable source of income — giving them a benefit from the taxes they paid to help others before them — and today prevents many from falling into poverty. Medicare, Medicaid, and other subsidized health care programs were created. Programs of public assistance and support continued to evolve, and were more equitably distributed, into the 1980s.

But in the 1980s, a right-wing political wrecking ball began to demolish the idea that justice means we look out for one another. To do this, the Right used a demonized, racist stereotype of a single Black *welfare queen*, dishonest and greedy, to promote the idea that poor people were stealing money that rightfully belonged to hard-working (white) Americans. At the same time, the Right used a demonized, racist stereotype of a violent, Black male *criminal* to begin replacing social and economic justice initiatives with a *law and order* agenda.

A sustained attack on welfare, or the various kinds of public assistance programs that help poor people, began. In the 1990s, many politicians from both major political parties joined in these efforts under the misleading label of *welfare reform*.

The Right also pursued an energetic agenda of union-busting; deregulation of utilities, media ownership, and other industries; pre-emptive war; and expansion of a for-profit prison industry at the expense of public investment in schools, housing, and health care. Other forms of corporate welfare have been strengthened, and there are new tax breaks for the wealthy.

In short, public assistance to the rich and powerful — who are primarily white — is increasing, while public assistance to poor and low-income people, people with disabilities, and elders who are living on fixed incomes, was either gutted or today remains under sustained attack. Commitment to even the most limited form of justice is being replaced by the push to privatize public services and resources.

The result?

- A broken social contract
- Destruction of the idea that we look out for one another through the creation of just social and economic relationships
- A politics of scarcity, fear, and resentment
- Rapidly increasing racial and economic inequality

Economic Justice, Public Assistance, and Poverty Are Queer Issues

We are advocates for all of the communities of which we are part — not only the LGBT community. We are, variously, people of color, Native American, bi-racial, white people, people with disabilities, able-bodied people, young people, and elders. We identify ourselves in various ways: trans, queer, gender nonconforming, multi-gender, lesbian, or gay.

Here's how our own lives intersect with public support or assistance, poverty, and struggles for economic justice.

DEAN SPADE

Dean Spade is the founder of Sylvia Rivera Law Project, NYC.



DEAN SPADE

Pretty much all of my life has been subsidized by various poverty alleviation programs, starting with AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependant Children, now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) when I was a kid, and Social Security survivor's benefits after my mom passed away, federal financial aid for college...

My family collected welfare on and off throughout my childhood. My mom was raising three kids by herself in rural Virginia, with a very limited education and no family for about a thousand miles. And our last stint on welfare started when she was laid off in the same month that our car burned up. We lived far away from the nearest town. [Then] she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She lived for a year after that and we stayed on public benefits; we got less than \$400 a month and some food stamps

COYA HOPE ARTICHOKE

Coya Hope Artichoker lives in Rapid City, SD, and currently works with Sacred Circle, an organization in South Dakota working to end violence against Native women. She is also involved in a number of organizing projects focused on native sovereignty, people of color communities, economic justice, and queer organizing.

Native people are different from any other group of people in the U.S. in the sense that we have a very specific relationship with the United States government. I don't think of federal dollars as public assistance but as the government fulfilling one of its promises. This

Public Assistance, Supports & Commitments

Everybody benefits from the various kinds of assistance, services, supports, and subsidies paid for by our tax dollars and provided by the government, no matter what our social class.

Those who demonize poor people and want to slash — or even eliminate — assistance to poor and low-income people, people with disabilities, and elders don't want you to think about that. But we do. And we want you to think about how public investments in these human needs are related to social and economic justice.

We also want you to think about who benefits, and how — and who doesn't — from attempts to privatize virtually *all* of these benefits, services, and supports.

changes where the conversation begins. I believe that most Native people don't see ourselves as being on public assistance. We were placed on reservations against our will. Part of the treaties were promises of food. People see food as part of the obligation of the U.S. government towards us.

I never thought about the federal dollars we receive as welfare. For example, at my job, I don't have health insurance and that isn't an issue because everyone who is employed here has access to the Indian Health Service. Medical care is part of what was promised in the treaties. I expect that.

As a small child, my mother was a single mother and we received WIC, food stamps. During the times my mother wasn't working, we received food or commodities. The U.S. government ships in large amounts of food to the reservations and then, based on your income, you qualify for certain kinds, like government cheese and peanut butter. We call these commodities.

We have jokes about this — like having a *commod bod* because commodities are very fattening, all sugar and starch. Or being a *stamp champ* because you receive or use food stamps. The long history and presence of this assistance has become part of our culture — not out of a culture of poverty but a culture of treaties.

LAURA HERSHEY

Laura Hershey is a free-lance writer, consultant, and activist living in Denver, Colorado.

Publicly-funded health care has been a mainstay of my existence throughout my adult life. I need home health assistance with all activities of daily living. I rely on Medicaid to provide me with daily attendant services, oxygen 24 hours a day, a wheelchair and maintenance for it, brace, and so on.

Home health care and attendant services have been crucial for me — not only so that I can live independently, but so that I can live at all. They make it possible for me to pursue my own goals in life, including school, writing, consulting, and community involvement.

Medicaid, in particular, is crucial to my independence, and to the independence of many people with disabilities. People need to understand that there is no private health insurance package that will pay for long-term daily attendant services.

“I think ignoring the fight for economic justice will just separate people in the LGBT community.”

Some packages may pay for short-term home care. But no private, employer-sponsored health insurance plans pay for long-term care at home. This is a key piece of information in terms of how we view public dollars spent for supports for people with disabilities.

REGINA SHAVERS

Regina Shavers founded and served as Executive Director of the Brooklyn, NY-based GRIOT Circle, an intergenerational and culturally diverse community-based organization dedicated to enriching the lives of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, especially elders. She died in January 2008.

I used to believe that only lazy, irresponsible people, such as drunks and dope fiends, got on welfare. Having been a *professional* (a lab

technician) for several years, those values reflected my working—and middle-class upbringing. Ironically, it was recovery, not drug and alcohol addiction, that originally got me on welfare.

I was admitted to Phoenix House Therapeutic Drug Treatment in 1969, and was automatically put on welfare. Residents don't receive the money personally; it goes into the House, which then provides the residents with everything they need.

Shortly after I left Phoenix House, I relapsed. Soon enough, sick, strung out, and unable to support myself, I was forced to shed my middle-class aversion to taking *hand-outs*, and I had to accept SSI (Supplemental Security Income).

Welfare saved my life. Without food, medical care, and their insistence that I attend a recovery program, I would not have survived.

After I had been in recovery for a few years, I had a few *off the books* jobs. When I got

laid off from a long-term job, and my unemployment benefits ran out, I again applied for welfare. But this time, clean and sober, I had a plan. I had enrolled in college and was determined to find a secure job. Finally, I was hired by the New York City Police Department. Welfare continued to support me for the six weeks it took for me to get on the city payroll, and that was my start.

CARMEN VAZQUEZ

Carmen Vazquez is a feminist, LGBT activist, organizer, writer, and community intellectual with an unyielding commitment to the realization of gender and sexual rights, equality and justice. She lives in New York City.

I grew up on welfare in the General Grants Projects of Harlem where I lived from the late fifties through



REGINA SHAVERS

about 1971. We received cash assistance and food stamps. My father was a WWII vet who was disabled in the war and became an alcoholic. When his fifth child was born, he lost his job and never had another one. With five children (and two more on the way) to clothe, shelter and feed, my mother had little choice but to go on public assistance.

The cash allowed us to pay rent at the low-income projects that gave poor families clean, safe apartments to call home. It allowed us to buy coats and shoes. Before food stamps, there was government surplus food, which we lined up for every month: butter, sugar, powdered eggs and milk, corn meal, Spam, cheddar cheese.

The cash assistance kept us off the streets and in school. We had a warm meal every morning and night. It served as a bridge between the time we were dependent to the time when we could work and take care of ourselves.

KYLE RAPINAN

Kyle Rapinan is an organizer for the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in Washington State. He is also an intern with the Safe Schools Coalition and the American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC) GLBTQ Youth Program in Seattle.

My mom is a single parent, and she raised three kids, me being the youngest. We've been pretty on and off with food stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). We've also gotten dentist care for low-income people, and sometimes rent assistance.

There were weird power dynamics at home. My older brother called me a *faggot* and hit me with a lot of different things, and there was a lot of domestic abuse.

My mom basically threw me out, blaming me, and told me I could make it on the street, where my older brother couldn't. I was a nervous wreck until I got to Lambert House. A large percentage of Lambert House* youth are homeless.

I actually applied for TANF for a child only, and was told that I needed a letter from my mom saying I was homeless, which

was ridiculous. I decided to tell her I needed it, and she did not respond.

I guess technically I'm not homeless now. I'm living with two lesbians, and I can live with them for the next six months. It's informal, but they're almost like foster parents. They both work to improve schools and make a safer community.

I break the stereotype of a homeless kid. I get good grades and will probably be the first person in my family to go to college. My mom won't give out her financial information, though, so I'm going to try to get other financial aid, like competitive scholarships.

I cannot apply for federal money. The government really does not notice that its policies with dependent/independent status hurt kids whose parents aren't supportive.



KYLE RAPINAN

BRANDON LACY CAMPOS

Brandon Lacy Campos, Minneapolis, Minnesota, is currently a fellow with the Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution.

I grew up in the projects in Duluth, Minnesota. At the time I lived there, it was a new and very nice self-contained unit, the kind of place a project is supposed to be. It was built with a focus on intentional community — there was a preschool for the kids in the project, a large communal space, open fields, woods. This was public housing done right, as opposed to skyscrapers.

We kids spent most of our time outside, exploring and playing. When I've wandered back there in later years, I've noticed it looked run-down, like they had the great idea and then couldn't follow through and keep it up.

Now, of course, it's knocked down. Duluth has grown and that was prime real estate — on a hill overlooking Lake Superior.

“[Privatization] removes the focus from people to things that can be owned.”

Say hel-lo to condos on the way — no more poor people with a view. My family was always on some form of Public Assistance, but never cash. My mom always worked but she worked low-wage jobs as a single mother. Minimum wage in a thrift store at \$3.25 when we moved to Kansas City.

We had WIC (supplemental nutrition assistance) and food assistance — I remember those nasty blocks of government cheese, government peanut butter. I got free lunch in school and breakfast when I got to high school.

With my mom, the system did what it was supposed to do. Once the kids moved out, she didn't need public assistance any more. She got a job that makes enough that she can do more than subsist.

As an adult, I have received unemployment twice. Once while I was waiting for my unemployment to kick in, I got a month of food benefit. I've received benefits through Every Penny Counts which is for folks living with HIV. Once a year you can get housing assistance for \$400.

I've received [access to] a stay in a halfway house. There are times when having

Basic Needs Cash Support

These forms of public assistance put government checks or cash directly into your hands. They are intended to help poor and low-income individuals and families, elders, and people with disabilities.

Among these supports are:

- Social Security
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for people with disabilities meeting specific medical and financial need criteria
- Social Security Disability Insurance
- Unemployment Insurance
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

Today, more and more restrictions are being placed on most of these forms of support, and there is a persistent right-wing attempt to privatize Social Security, placing a stable source of government income at the whim of the stock market.

* Lambert House is a Seattle center for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning youth and their allies that encourages empowerment through the development of leadership, social and life skills.

unemployment really saved my life. The system isn't perfect. You sure don't get enough money to do very much — but it gave me the space to figure things out without having to find another job right away. When I went to treatment and lost my job, public assistance let me step back and take care of myself for six months. I wouldn't be talking with you now if that hadn't happened.

A. SAVITZ

A. Savitz is a 25-year veteran of LGBT health care advocacy and community activism, and is a Jewish professional. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

Although raised and educated with considerable privilege, and despite having worked all of my adult life in both skilled trades and professions, a series of severe medical problems led me to public assistance. I was couch-surfing within a year of diagnosis: unemployable, uninsured, and unable to afford even minimal healthcare, or a home.

With public assistance, and the ongoing help of my friends and religious community, I have a comfortable (though not completely stable) place to live, enough to eat, sustaining healthcare (except when the treatment isn't approved, providers won't accept low reimbursements, or basic medications aren't in the formulary...forget alternative medicine), and most importantly, options more than mere physical survival. Options that include politics.

LUZVIMINDA CARPENTER (LULU)

Luzviminda Carpenter coordinates the Ladies First Hip-Hop Project for Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) in Seattle, Washington.

I lived in Spokane for several years when I went to college. For several months, I was technically homeless, living at different people's houses. I didn't think of myself as homeless, though, since I wasn't actually living on the streets. During that time, I would go to the food bank to get food so I could eat.

I didn't get financial aid. I was trying to finish classes, but could not. I couldn't finish my degree, I had no money, and I was homeless. The shaming factor really got to me. So I went back to my parents' house.

[Later] I went to work for AmeriCorps, which doesn't pay much, and they suggested we all apply for food stamps. This was the cost of being an AmeriCorps volunteer. So I put my pride aside and I got food stamps. Until then, I had never accessed public assistance.

IGNACIO RIVERA

Ignacio is a Black Boricua, Trans Multi-gender, queer, economic and racial justice activist/performance artist/community organizer/consultant. He is also a Board member with Queers for Economic Justice and lives in New York City.



IGNACIO RIVERA

I am a person who currently identifies as trans, but when I was on welfare years ago I identified as a lesbian. I was a young, lesbian mother on welfare for eight years. My identity as a lesbian then greatly affected me as a poor woman on different levels.

The fact that I was a lesbian was one of the reasons that I needed welfare. I was not able to get support from family members. I was not able to secure a well-paying job because I was a high school drop-out, and I feared being outed. In 1989, the concept of lesbian mothers was not as visible as it is today.

While I was on welfare, I could not reveal my lesbianism for fear that because I was poor and a *sexual deviant*, my child would be taken from me. I played the game and had to lie and say my daughter's father was dead.

I conceived my child through a previous heterosexual relationship. That relationship was an abusive one. I was able to escape the *mandatory naming of the father rule* that now negatively affects domestic violence survivors as well as lesbians who fear losing their children due to homophobia and those lesbians who are home-inseminated.

Basic Needs System Subsidies

You don't get dollars, but various kinds of goods are given to you to meet a basic need.

Among these supports are:

- Section 8 or other subsidized housing
- Nutrition supplements and supports for women, infants, and children
- Government commodity foods — cheese, peanut butter, etc.
- Food stamps
- Medical care for elders and low-income individuals, children, and families
- Student grants/loans
- First-time homeowner grants
- Partially-subsidized, state-based health insurance programs

In order to gain some control in my life, I used welfare to my advantage and went to school. Under the current regulations I would not have been able to go. I got my GED. I received my associates in Liberal Arts: Social Work, my Bachelors in Human Studies: Sociology, and my Masters in Sociology.

Although I was lucky enough to utilize welfare before the revisions and get my education, as an activist and artist, I know that I can be one step away from homelessness. Having a true safety net should be important, not only to those who are currently living it, but for all of us.

The Violence of Privatization & Decreased Public Investment in Human Needs

Privatization refers to the transfer of wealth, assets, and public services and function, and decision-making about them, from the government to corporations and privately-held agencies and organizations.

The process of privatization also transfers accountability from public bodies, that can (at least in theory) be held accountable by the people, to individuals or corporate entities who have no accountability to the public. This should be of particular concern to LGBTQ people and organizations, not only because private contractors largely remain free to discriminate against queers, but also because this process is profoundly anti-democratic.

What are the impacts on queer communities of increasing shifts in public spending away from human needs, and toward policing, prisons, and war — and the network of public and private interests who have a huge stake in their expansion?

BRANDON LACY CAMPOS

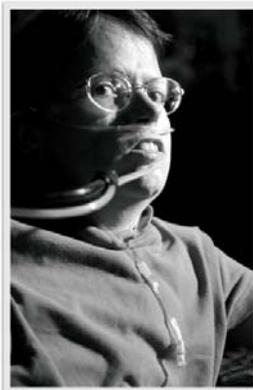
Its goal (privatization) is to take the responsibility of taking care of people and move it away from *all of us* to whoever wants to or gets paid to do it. It removes the focus from people to things that can be owned. As just a regular person, you don't have any power over a private system, except the power that comes through how you spend your money. Which brings us right back to leaving poor folks out of the conversation.

In North Carolina, I worked with a statewide queer youth social justice organization to stop a private youth prison from being built. Queer and straight youth were in coalition to stop this prison, and our rallying cry was *Schools, not jails!* That was a moment where I felt like I was part of something to stop privatization. There are other isolated incidents of stopping privatization, but nothing on a big scale, no movement focused on bringing back a sense of the shared public.

LAURA HERSHEY

I especially think about privatization in terms of health care. The whole anti-tax crusade that's been going on over the last 20 years has been devastating to the states in terms of lost public dollars for education, Medicaid and other health programs, and other public supports. We've all been harmed by the idea of taxation as a terrible burden rather than as a way of creating more justice and more livable communities.

There is a lot of fraud and waste and profiteering in the corporations and institutions that provide services to people with disabilities. Resources should be there for the people with disabilities, and for the workers who actually provide the services, not just for the vendor companies. These provider agencies make a



LAURA HERSHEY © TOM OLIN

lot of money selling goods and services for people with disabilities. It's much less lucrative for the low-paid workers, like home care attendants, most of whom don't get health care coverage themselves.

A. SAVITZ

I'm disturbingly aware of social and policy trends toward institutionalized coercion and control. Physical and data surveillance. The mercenaries called *security contractors*. Increasing criminalization and incarceration of the poor, the young, the addicted, the economically marginalized.

Personally, and locally, other than commercialization/exploitation of the urban LGBTQ market, I've mostly noticed the change to big business/business foundations as major donors and policy leaders. Large businesses find LGBTQ diversity in their interest — for now. It's made finding allies and short-term funding easier, but ongoing funding, endowment growth, and capital campaigns more difficult.

“I don't think of federal dollars as public assistance but as the government fulfilling one of its promises. This changes where the conversation begins.”

I think one of the most insidious effects of dependence on major resources is that the LGBTQ community no longer scales its activities to its members' personal and financial limits.

We want larger, more elaborate, and more comprehensive events and organizations. But we have volunteered to tailor our LGBTQ communities' activities to the requirements of the businesses, foundations, and government agencies that provide much of our funding. What will we do as that funding ends, or the demands of our backers diverge from the best interests of LGBTQ peoples?

COYA HOPE ARTICOKER

Privatization doesn't affect us the same way it does [non-Indians] — but it still has an effect. Medical care is one part of our agreement with the U.S. government. This is not public assistance, but is part

of the commitment the government made. I come from the Rosebud Reservation. As someone who is an enrolled tribal member, I have access to health care services. I can go to any Indian Health Service hospital or clinic and they have to take me. You have to stay in the Indian Health Service system unless you have private health insurance. It is very hard to transfer our health care to private health care without permission, or a separate, private policy.

There is talk about building a new Indian Health Services hospital to replace the old one and having it be *out-patient only*. In-patient care is currently available, but they are downsizing and say they don't have the numbers to justify keeping an in-patient system specifically for Indians.

This is intense, and I don't trust their (the U.S. government) numbers. The solution to the issue of *lower numbers* is to increase what they call *contract health*. The government is contracting the white private hospital in town to provide

in-patient care to Indians. Rather than maintaining the Indian Health Service in-patient hospital, they are sending the money to the private hospital for in-patient care. This feels like another way to give money owed us (Native people) to a private, white-led industry.

Before the war (in Iraq) began, Indian Health Service's budget for the construction of new buildings got about \$100 to 120 million a year, and now it's down to \$20 million and it appears to be dropping.

DEAN SPADE

Many services, like shelters and youth services, are run by religious groups that discriminate against LGBT people.

The move away from supporting poor people, and toward imprisoning people for committing *crimes* like sleeping outside, being addicted to drugs, and having sex for money has meant that more and more people in my community face the horrible violence of the adult and juvenile criminal justice systems.

Community—Wide System Subsidies & Supports

These expenditures go to support public spending that is deemed to be in the public interest and is intended to be widely available.

Examples are:

- Public schools, including free and reduced breakfast/lunch programs
- Streets & roads
- Sidewalk & street accessibility features
- Sewers & waste management
- Public health, including immunizations & disease control/prevention
- Emergency medical systems
- Firefighting
- Disaster response & relief
- Police, prisons & other criminal justice infrastructure
- Military & Homeland Security
- Parks & public land
- Agricultural subsidies

Trans people, especially, are locked up in large numbers because we can't access jobs due to discrimination. We get kicked out of welfare offices, put in dangerous shelters where we face sexual assault, and are just generally excluded from the remaining shreds of the welfare system. The result is imprisonment. The conditions trans people face there create long-term mental health and physical damage that impacts our community.

The loss of funding for legal services has a big effect on our communities, too. When our benefits get illegally terminated, or we get marked *absent* from workfare jobs where we're being harassed or discriminated against, it's very hard to get help fighting for our rights to benefits.

Increasing resources for the *War on Terror* has also had a big impact on trans communities because those changes have made it even harder to get ID, which is already a huge issue for trans people, and impacts our ability to work and get essential services.

“Is the movement brave enough to meet the people who are really living these struggles...the people who are economically & racially put aside?”

What We Would Like to Say to Queer Groups Everywhere...

...and to all of our allies about what is lost to the larger LGBT movement when we fail to address poverty and fight for economic justice.

LUZVIMINDA CARPENTER (LULU)

You leave out the voices of many people. The voices of many people of color will never be represented. The movement needs voices of people that are authentically living economic justice struggles.

Is the movement brave enough to meet the people who are really living these struggles...even the people who are stereotyped as violent? The people who are economically and racially put aside?

At the root of a lot of gay organizing, economics are never really seen. They say we live in a classless society, but there is a clear hierarchy. We would be having a very different conversation about priorities if economics were included.

Marriage is a priority to the gay movement. But it's not the priority for communities of color. The question here is larger: how do you keep a community and your family safe? It's not just about sexuality with me, and marriage alone is not what I'm looking for. I'm looking to create community that supports and empowers itself in many different ways.

Marriage is a wedge issue. In the gay movement, economic status determines who gets to put their issue on the table. Because of privilege, this issue gets on the table. If we don't have the resources to put our issues on the table, the intersections of race, class, sexuality, gender, all that, will never be addressed.



LUZVIMINDA CARPENTER (LULU)

KYLE RAPINAN

I think ignoring the fight for economic justice will just separate people in the LGBT community. People and groups just seem to focus wherever the money is coming from. So youth, and especially at-risk youth, get dropped from the picture.

The whole movement might collapse if we don't focus on the youth and bridge the gap between generations.

IGNACIO RIVERA

The awareness around lesbianism in the welfare system is still very invisible. The subject of sexuality (and gender identification and expression) is not of concern to the system we describe as our *safety net*. The welfare system is a heterosexist one, and with the welfare reform laws that began in the 90's, it became even clearer to those of us who depended on it.

The *naming the father* rule, compensating mothers who married and stayed married to their children's fathers, the fatherhood initiative and even abstinence until marriage sex education in schools all were a scary and clear indicator to some of us that not only poor women/ people were targets, but those of us who were queer/trans and poor were also having a war waged against us.

I think this was at a point where some organizations were talking about the connections with queer and trans people and poverty but very few were actually doing anything about it.

The Mainstream was trying so hard to prove that we were queers with money and created a very narrow view of who we were, that queerness looked like a gay rich white guy. Of course, this is not the reality. Homelessness rates, food pantries, shelters and more are all flooded with queer and trans people farther pushed to the margins.

A. SAVITZ

I'll work on marriage, or the right to die for the military, when you help everyone live in peace, health, and justice.

DEAN SPADE

Mainstream gay organizations have not prioritized economic justice, and I've found it harder and harder to see myself reflected in their agendas.

Fighting for rights only for economically privileged trans and queer people is a losing strategy. It is clear that the current economic climate is pushing more and more people into poverty, more people are living without health insurance, and everyone has less job security.

If we only fight for health care rights for those who get health care privately through their jobs, but ignore those who get Medicaid and Medicare, or if we only fight for parental rights for two-parent, middle-class families and ignore the violence of the child welfare system, we're just fighting for less and less queer and trans people.

A winning strategy is a strategy of solidarity, where we stand with all the millions of people who are losing out in this system, rather than just fighting for a queer piece of the pie for the few queer and trans people who have access to the pie.



BRANDON LACY CAMPOS

LAURA HERSHEY

When the LGBT movement overlooks economic justice, they're overlooking not only people with disabilities, but also the people who do caregiving and support service work for us.

Sometimes I think that the LGBT movement has mostly adopted a civil rights model of non-discrimination. Everyone should be treated the same. And that's okay — up to a point. But a more expansive concept is the concept of human rights at an international level.

"I don't know that my life as an advocate would have been possible without welfare."

Human rights are about the fundamental right to the dignity of the person, to a home, to a job. It goes beyond non-discrimination. Economic justice is a large part of the human rights concept.

Now, there's increasing talk about creating gay nursing homes. Sometimes I hear people talking about that concept as a positive thing. That's so narrow. It doesn't solve the problem. Creating new gay versions of institutions that are like prisons doesn't actually take us forward.

None of us wants to have our lives controlled by other people. I don't think gay nursing homes are the answer for LGBT people with disabilities or who are getting old. But it's hard for our movement to talk about these things. In some ways, I think it's a case of *out of sight, out of mind*.

Nobody wants to think about nursing homes, or getting old, or becoming unable to function without a lot of daily assistance. So there's a lot of denial going on. That makes it very hard to think about new options.

Nursing homes have been the only response for so long that people have come to think of them as a natural part of the social landscape.

BRANDON LACY CAMPOS

If we aren't integrating poverty work and thinking about economic justice in everything we do, we are not working towards justice. If you can't tell me how what you're doing is affecting the whole of us, and not just your friends, then stop what you're doing.

I feel like there has been some work, however minute, on recognizing the importance of addressing race in our queer work. Everyone knows that your work is not valid in any justice context if it's all white people doing it.

That doesn't mean that folks have changed and that there are lots of people of color in leadership positions — this awareness

exists more often as lip service than action. But it is a place to build from. We have to do the same kind of thing with class. Our work is not valid if it's only people with economic privilege imagining and doing it.



CARMEN VAZQUEZ

What Our Experiences Have Taught Us

CARMEN VAZQUEZ

Welfare made a difference. I don't know that college or the rest of my life as a teacher, trainer, and activist would have been possible without the cash, food, and housing that were a safety net for my family and thousands of families like mine. I don't know that my life as an advocate for LGBT liberation would have been possible without welfare.

DEAN SPADE

Growing up poor had a massive impact on the rest of my life, primarily because it helped me understand the economy in a way that I think only poor people can. I understand that what I have relates to what others have, that poverty is not a matter of work ethics or morality. It is a matter of state operations of distributing wealth, and that I can demand a fairer distribution.

My life and well-being are connected to those of others, so as I moved out of poverty, I have maintained a strong sense that I am personally responsible for wealth distribution. I need to live simply and give away as much as I can, and at the same time, work with social justice movements demanding that resources be distributed fairly.

I realize that everyone, not just people on welfare, is supported by the state, whether it is through public schools, roads, tax breaks, or Social Security — and that giving all the breaks to rich people, and then blaming poor people for being poor has got to stop.

My life work has been focused on economic justice because of my own experiences of pain and trauma growing up poor. I have come to see my role in joining a global struggle for redistribution of resources, an end to exploitation, and self-determination for all people.

KYLE RAPINAN

Being from a really low-income family has really pushed me to be a survivor...I think that being poor and not having what everybody else has let me see that there's a connection between having privilege and being oppressed.

For example, I have privilege because I can pass for a white American, but I'm oppressed because I'm a kind of effeminate—acting person. Both of these things affect me being able to look for services.

IGNACIO RIVERA

Although I cannot personally speak about trans people and welfare since I identified as a lesbian at the time, through my work with Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), I know that *reform* has been horrific for trans—identified individuals.

Work mandates have forced trans people who have lived in their preferred gender to dress according to their birth sex. Many trans people have had to leave work sites due to harassment and lack of protection.

Fighting for a New Commitment to Economic Justice

Placing a commitment to economic justice at the heart of LGBT work takes more than rhetorical declarations of solidarity.

It demands that we place the voices, histories, and experiences of those who experience poverty and struggle for basic survival at the center of decision-making. And it demands that we confront white supremacy and racism in every aspect of our work — ranging from how we frame and articulate issues to whose voices are centralized in strategic decision-making to who we depend on for our funding.

“Mainstream gay organizations have not prioritized economic justice, and I’ve found it harder and harder to see myself reflected in their agendas.”

Others have said that leaving the mandatory work site, which meant losing benefits and going to the streets, was safer than navigating through the welfare system and its transphobic mandates.

A. SAVITZ

The personal is political. Again.

I have the empathy, interest, and skills, if no longer an excess of money and energy, to pursue justice. Being experienced, I have more perspective on what change is possible in any given period of time, or economic/political climate.

I also know the LGBTQ political and social mechanisms we've created to pass single-issue legislation, or fund one election cycle, will have to develop considerably to change United States attitudes about providing a baseline standard of living.



A. SAVITZ

COYA HOPE ARTICHOKER

We're on reservations because that is where we were put historically. We've been put on land that's not farmable, in really isolated and economically poor areas.

Given the genocide that took place and the attempts to acculturate us and to integrate us into what would be considered modern society, the U.S. government created a situation which put us in poverty. There is historical precedent for that, our poverty did not occur in a vacuum. Let me be clear, it is this historical precedent that has created this.

A lot of folks think native people are waiting for handouts or there is a belief that we are complicit in our poverty. That's not true — it's a question of land, of community, and of being together as a people.

Given a vision for ourselves, I don't believe this is level of poverty, is what my people would want for ourselves, our children, or our families.

BRANDON LACY CAMPOS

Everything I have accomplished has come with some kind of assistance — from birth to college to treatment to sitting here right now. I get to engage with social justice work and be fierce about change because of my education and the safety net that helped me out.

All queer people, and especially folks with HIV, survive because of public dollars. Economic justice and poverty are always there. They define who gets to participate and who gets left behind.

Sometimes folks are not there doing the social justice work because they have to work crazy, long hours to just pay their bills. And so folks who never needed any kind of public assistance and who have the time and ability to work for low-wage nonprofit jobs end up defining the movement.

You cannot have anti-poverty work done by people who do not personally understand poverty. It makes it too abstract.

As long as people with money and time define the issues, then poor folks will be left out. Gay marriage is only a fundamental issue if you already know you can pay your bills, have a place to sleep, and eat something tonight.



COYA HOPE ARTICHOKER

IGNACIO RIVERA

I have seen the harsh changes that occurred with welfare reform. Under the current regulations, I would not have been able to go to school. Thousands and thousands of welfare recipients had to drop out of school due to mandatory

work provisions. Quick-fix *trainings* are encouraged and education is not emphasized.

If getting people off of welfare and into a secure job is the true goal of reform, then the welfare system needs to be revamped. Although I was lucky enough to utilize welfare before the revisions and get my education, as an activist and artist, I know that I can be one step away from homelessness.

COYA HOPE ARTICOKER

Every single question starts from such a different place and a different framework than public assistance or the social contract. *If you want to support the First Nations community, you first and foremost support sovereignty, now and forever. That's where it needs to begin and end.*

If we lose our sovereignty then we lose our ability to advocate for the services that were promised to us. We need an alliance around maintaining the integrity of the promises made.

This is about supporting a nation in our government—to-government relationships. Once we have our sovereignty, then we will always be in a better position to negotiate the rest. WE are our own nations.

DEAN SPADE

Today, it troubles me to know that if my family were in the same situation, in many states we wouldn't have qualified for welfare by the time my mom got sick because we'd have already exceeded our lifetime limits, or because my mom was not a citizen.

It's a horror to me to imagine kids watching their parents not get health care and watching them die, going without the basic assistance that people need to live.

LAURA HERSHEY

Medicaid is different in every state. Some states don't provide the range of services or support that I get here in Colorado; some states offer more services, some less. In some states, Medicaid does not pay for daily attendant services at home.

Even in those states where Medicaid does provide home care, not everyone who needs it can qualify for Medicaid. Eligibility requirements cut out a lot of people. This leaves people with very difficult choices, such as going into nursing homes or relying on relatives and friends to provide unpaid home care.

Denial of this kind of care results in denial of civil and human rights to people with disabilities. When we don't provide public support for independent living, we force many people into the kind of institutional care that is very much like a prison.

One activist recently said that we should consider people in nursing homes to be political prisoners, because they are there primarily as a result of political decisions about the allocation of public dollars.

a living, not live in poverty, and live independently. But most people with disabilities don't even know about this possibility, and those who do are often scared to try it, because it's risky and complicated.

The rules should be clearer and easier to follow; they are incredibly complicated, and if you don't do it right, there's a punitive response.

But overall, this is a good concept, and it should be expanded and made much more accessible so that more people with disabilities and others who need health care or financial support can be employed and earn money without being immediately cut off.

You know, there are huge economic justice issues around paid and unpaid caregiving.

"Everyone, not just people on welfare, is supported by the state, whether it is through public schools, roads, tax breaks, or Social Security — and giving all the breaks to the rich people, and then blaming poor people for being poor has got to stop."

I think it's important to talk about Medicaid as a modified *indigent* program. Historically, it has always been an indigent program, so people had to be poor to qualify.



Generally, for people with disabilities, that means getting Supplemental Security Income (SSI). That's one factor that stops a lot of people with disabilities from seeking employment.

However, because of the advocacy of the disability rights movement, some rules have been put in place that can allow some people to work, to earn an income, and not lose Medicaid eligibility. I'm one of the people who has been able to do that, to work as a free-lance writer and consultant and still maintain Medicaid eligibility.

I can't accrue assets, or save for retirement, but at least I can earn

A. SAVITZ

Social change takes power and power resides in large groups with common cause, political access, and money. If we don't educate and organize ourselves about economic realities and trends, we can't make enduring political and social change.

Government Contracts for Services

The Right, with help from friends in both parties who are beholden to corporate interests, is working to privatize almost all forms of public assistance, supports, and commitments.

While the government historically has contracted out some work, the programs — at least in theory — still belonged to the people who funded it.

Now, the Right seeks to remove this level of accountability — and to increase expenditures in certain categories — prisons, the military — while decreasing funding for basic human needs.

Fighting for Economic Justice in Every LGBT Agenda... because there's no justice for queers without it.

**QUEERS
FOR
ECONOMIC
JUSTICE**

QEJ thanks all of the people who gave interviews and kindly permitted us to print excerpts from them.



It's time to add a powerful queer voice to demands for a new, stronger, justice-serving economic social contract.



This publication is dedicated to the memory of Regina Shavers, gentle friend, fearless warrior, and magnificent elder. Her life and her work continue to inspire us all.

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If economic justice isn't already a central part of your LGBT agenda:

- Build strong, engaged relationships with other community groups doing economic justice work in your area.
- Use this publication as a discussion tool for your group or organization. If your group includes no one with lived experience of poverty, public assistance, privatization or economic justice, ask yourselves why — and then look at some of the tools and resources listed here.
- Check out these resources and see how they might be utilized to help you gain a deeper understanding of why economic justice matters to queer communities.

Several of these websites will also contain links to additional groups and resources:

Queers for Economic Justice: www.q4ej.org

Class Matters: www.classmatters.org

Movement Vision Lab: (Center for Community Change)
www.movementvisionlab.org

Southerners on New Ground (S.O.N.G.):
(see downloadable tool for helping groups address the relationships among different forms of oppression)

www.southernersonnewground.org

Suzanne Pharr: (Articles include: Inside/Out: Democratic Participation & Economic Justice in Our Own Organization; Funding Our Radical Work; and Welfare Queens to Gay Marriage)
www.suzannepharr.org/thoughts.htm

Tribal Nations Sovereignty Primer:
www.airpi.org/pubs/indinsov.html