

Trans and Gender Diverse Self-Advocacy in Health and Social Services

Many trans and gender diverse people have had negative experiences accessing health and social services. Trans and gender diverse people must often be their own best, and sometimes only, advocate to access necessary healthcare or social services. This resource was created to help trans and gender diverse people best advocate for themselves and their needs in health and social services.

Essential Context: Trans and gender diverse people are often pressured to change or simplify our stories, lives, needs and experiences in ways that providers will understand.

While the landscape is changing, and more providers are building their understanding of trans and gender diverse communities, many providers continue to reinforce harmful notions about trans and gender diverse identities. While honesty and accuracy are important when accessing health and social services, you always have the right to choose to share whichever aspects of your identity and your story you are most comfortable discussing with your provider.

Preparing for a Health or Social Service-Related Appointment:

1. **Reflect on your priorities for the meeting:** Before an appointment begins, reflect on your key priorities for the conversation. Are there specific next steps you would like to explore? Are there specific issues, or concerns, you'd like to discuss? Write them out ahead of time, in order of priority. This list can help guide you in your conversation with a provider.
2. **Do your research:** Health and social service providers don't always have all of the answers, or know what the required steps are, particularly when it comes to trans health and healthcare. If you are looking for transition-related healthcare, it can be helpful to do your own research ahead of time, to both help understand often-complex health issues, and to better understand the required processes to access specific health interventions, like beginning hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or gender confirmation surgeries.

3. Invite a friend or loved one: Having someone there with you can make a big difference. Bring a friend, partner or loved one along to support you, and talk through what you think you'll need from them during the appointment ahead of time. You can also reach out to local 2SLGBTQ+ organizations and they may be able to help connect you with a volunteer to accompany you to an appointment.
4. Reach out in advance: If you are worried about your experience accessing care as a trans person, and if this is your first appointment with a new provider, you have every right to contact them ahead of time (email is a good option.) and ask questions that matter to you. You can ask if they have experience working with trans people or have received training on trans-inclusive health services.

Advocating for Yourself During an Appointment:

1. You have the right to be referred to respectfully: While it's rarely a comfortable experience, and not one that you should have to deal with in the first place, care providers might not know the best ways to talk about, or respectfully talk with, a trans or gender diverse person. If you feel comfortable, you can correct a care provider who is using the wrong name or pronouns. In these moments, having a friend or loved one with you can make a big difference, and reduce the burden on you to always advocate for yourself.
2. You can disagree with your provider: Providers aren't experts on everything, and they won't always have all the answers. Patients know what they need best. If you don't agree with what your provider is recommending, you can voice your discomfort or uncertainty. You may also correct them if they are sharing inaccurate or out of date information.
3. You can come back to what matters most: As your session nears its end, reflect back on your key priorities – what were you looking for from this appointment? You should feel comfortable bringing up issues that weren't discussed sufficiently, or which you haven't yet had a chance to explore.
4. If you need to, you can leave: If the session is triggering, or the provider is not inclusive, you have every right to immediately end your appointment and leave the location. You do not have to put up with mistreatment, misgendering, discriminatory or otherwise inappropriate behaviour.

Advocating for Yourself After an Appointment:

1. If you had a negative experience: You have legally protected rights in Ontario and Canada as a trans and/or gender diverse person. Health and social service providers do not have the right to mistreat or discriminate against you. If you have a negative experience with a provider, you may contact the organization, or the provider's regulatory body (depending on their profession). Most health and social service organizations will have a patient complaint or ombudsperson whom you can contact with your concerns. Immediately after a negative appointment, if you feel comfortable doing so, write down what happened and what specific conduct was inappropriate. This will be helpful should you choose to make a complaint.

2. You can request to change providers: If you don't feel comfortable with your provider, for any reason, you can request to change providers. While this is not always possible, or may result in delays, it is an option available to you.
3. You can send a follow up email: If you felt there were issues that were not sufficiently discussed, or if there were next steps you need confirmed or clarified, many providers will permit you to send a follow up email. This is an effective way to ensure your priorities are understood by your provider.
4. You can care for yourself: Talking about our health, physical or mental, can be particularly draining, or triggering, for many trans and gender diverse people. A key aspect of self-advocacy is advocating for our own right to take the time we need to be healthy. After an appointment, give yourself some time to decompress and process your experience.