

THE IMPACT OF  
**COVID-19**  
on the LGBT Community in Belize

MARCH - JUNE, 2020

The opinions outlined in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Our Circle (OC), United Nations Development Program - Belize (UNDP Belize), or CoC Nederlands (CoC). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of OC, UNDP Belize, or CoC concerning the autonomy or service delivery of any entity represented in this document.

OC is committed to fostering supportive communities, educating the public, and pursuing policy change, all to advance both legal and lived equality for these LGBT-headed families in Belize. As a non-governmental organization, OC acts with its partners to create lasting change for LGBT families by organizing our work into campaigns, which are executed at the grassroots and national levels.

This publication was made possible through the support provided by the United Nations Development Program within the framework of the Civil Society Organization (CSO-Hub) and CoC Nederland's PRIDE program. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the aforementioned organization or the Dutch Government.

**Publisher:** Our Circle  
14 New Road (l/f)  
Belize City, Belize  
Tel: 501-623-6062  
Email: [ourcirclebze@gmail.com](mailto:ourcirclebze@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.ourcirclebze.weebly.com](http://www.ourcirclebze.weebly.com)

**Report Prepared by:** Derricia Castillo  
Managing Director  
Our Circle

**Report Designed by:** Robert Garbutt  
Freelance Graphic Designer  
Tel: 501-606-2707  
Email: [r.garbutt007@gmail.com](mailto:r.garbutt007@gmail.com)



# CONTENTS

BACKGROUND.....	4
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS.....	6
KEY FINDINGS.....	7
SCOPE & METHODOLOGY .....	8
COVID-19 IMPACT REPORT .....	10
1. Mental Health .....	10
2. Isolation .....	12
3. LGBT-phobic Family .....	13
4. Domestic Violence.....	14
5. Financial Impact.....	15
6. Access to Healthcare.....	17
LGBT COMMUNITIES & SECTOR RESPONSES.....	18
SPECIFIC SERVICES OF NGOS TO THE LGBT COMMUNITY .....	19
Conclusion .....	20



## BACKGROUND

On January 30, 2020, the Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak known as coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)<sup>1</sup>.

On March 11, 2020, due to alarming levels of spread and severity, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

Belize's first case was announced on March 23rd, 2020<sup>3</sup>, and the second announced on March 25th, 2020<sup>4</sup>.

On March 30th, 2020 a state of emergency was announced across the country, as well as a curfew from 8:00 pm to 5:00 am<sup>5</sup>. Only essential workers and services were allowed to operate.

In April 2020, Our Circle (OC) conducted a rapid situation assessment to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic and related quarantine measures affect the LGBT community in Belize. OC wanted to find out the impact on the way of life for the LGBT community due to quarantine measures; to what extent LGBT individuals have the resources to survive in emergency situations; and what measures are LGBT persons utilizing to ensure their personal and family safety during COVID-19.

This survey has the objective of generating data to analyze the repercussions of COVID-19 for the LGBT community in Belize and guide the response of the many actors involved in the pandemic response, and socioeconomic recovery strategies.

---

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, 2020. Statement on the second meeting of the IHR Emergency Committee on the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)

<sup>2</sup> Pan American Health Organization, 2020. WHO characterizes COVID-19 as a pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> "Ministry of Health Announces First Case of COVID-19". *Ministry of Health (Belize)*. 23 March 2020

<sup>4</sup> BBN Staff (25 March 2020). "Ministry of Health confirms 2nd Covid-19 positive case; awaiting results of more tests" *Breaking News Belize*

<sup>5</sup> "Prime Minister Dean Barrow announces countrywide state of emergency". *Breaking News Belize*. 30 March, 2020



76 respondents participated in the assessment. None of the participants reported having taken a COVID-19 test swab during the time of data collection.

For the purpose of this report, those classified as “other” identified as pansexual.

### **Organization Focus Group Participants:**

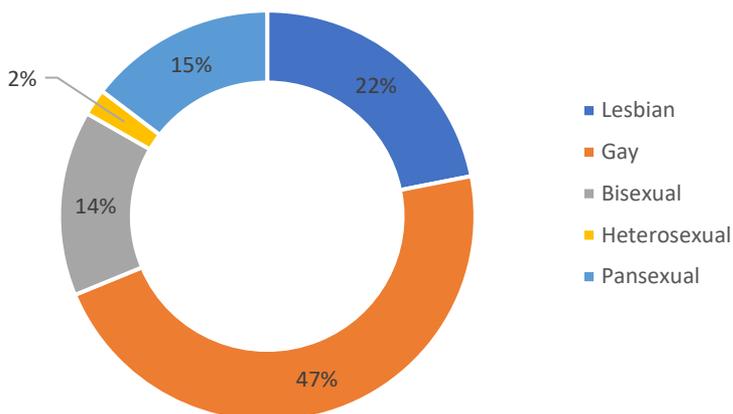
- Belize Family Life Association (BFLA)
- Belize Trans Colors (BTC)
- Belize Youth Empowerment for Change (BYEC)
- Collaborative Network of Persons Living with HIV (CNET+)
- Empower Yourself Belize Movement (EYBM)
- GoJoven Belize Alumni Association (GoJoven)
- Our Circle (OC)



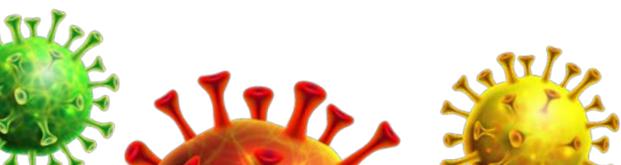
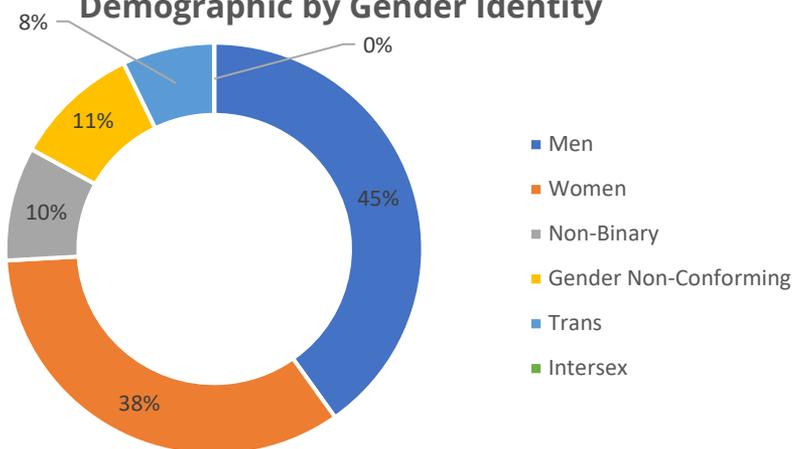
# SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Among the survey respondents:

## Demographic by Sexual Orientation



## Demographic by Gender Identity



## KEY FINDINGS

Our Circle's Covid-19 community survey of LGBT people living in Belize has found that:

**52%**

would like to access an adequate supply of food and water.

- **43%** identify as gay men;
- **60%** live in the Belize District;
- **80%** live with their partners and/or children

**13%**

do not feel safe where they are currently staying.

- **13%** do not feel safe where they are currently staying.
- **65%** of LGBT people aged 50+;
- **50%** identified as bisexual;
- **70%** live in the Stann Creek District

**49%**

have experienced a negative impact on their mental health due to social distancing and isolation

- **49%** identify as gay men;
- **31%** lived with family members or parents;
- **31%** lived alone

**79%**

would not have the financial resources to pay for medical treatment if they were to become ill.

- **16%** reported being HIV+;
- **15%** has experienced difficulties in getting medication



## SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The survey was aimed at self-identified LGBT persons living and/or working in Belize from March to June 2020.

The methodology of the survey included the use of quantitative data and information collection methods. This is a descriptive and exploratory survey report. Due to the exploratory nature of the exercise, the snowball sampling method was selected. This is a nonprobability sampling method used with hard-to-find populations who can only be contacted persons or entities who can identify these people.

This means that the results of the exercise are neither representative nor generalizable; however, they do provide an approximation of the repercussions of COVID-19 for LGBT persons in Belize. It should be stated that the snowball sampling method fosters trust among the target population about answering the questionnaire because this trusted figure can provide information to target individuals about the purposes of the questionnaire and help to dispel doubts about the use of the data (informed consent). Additionally, it is important to point out that this survey is relevant in that it serves as a point of departure for reflection on the structural challenges for providing responses that include LGBT persons and address their needs.

In terms of limitations, it should also be stated that the survey has limitations concerning representativity, due to the limited number of responses collected from the transgender community in Belize (7%).

The information was collected through an online questionnaire (see appendix) available in English. It was activated on April 7th, 2020, and remained open until June 11th, 2020.

This questionnaire was designed under the data protection principles of OC, which include informed consent for collection and use of information, ensuring the confidentiality and protection of the data of minors, from whom the form did not collect any kind of information.



The considerations taken into account for the choice and combination of methods and means of collecting information included:

- I. The urgent need for information on the target population and
- II. The limited options for conducting fieldwork in different districts, given movement and distancing restrictions.

The means of disseminating the questionnaire included:

1. **Dissemination through community trustees**

An extensive network of government and non-governmental organizations that work with LGBT persons.

2. **Dissemination through Social Media (Facebook and Whatsapp)**

Social networks were used as digital marketing tools which enabled the creation of ads directed to a specific population segmented by expert criteria and variables which social media users had voluntarily entered into the apps (as a result, the data are self-reported and not verifiable). For this reason, it should be noted that the population sample was necessarily biased by multiple factors, most notably age range, smartphone usage, and internet access.



# COVID-19 IMPACT REPORT

While Coronavirus (COVID-19) poses a unique effect on the daily lives of everyone, individuals from marginalized or vulnerable populations may be overly affected by the effects of the virus. This document focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) community in Belize.

Inequality faced by the LGBT community may mean that the impacts of actions such as social distancing and self-isolation are particularly detrimental to LGBT people. This section outlines some of these impacts.

## 1. Mental Health

COVID-19 poses a threat to the mental health and wellbeing of many people. The threats of COVID-19, coupled with the stress created by living as a stigmatized minority, further increases the likeliness of LGBT persons experiencing mental health concerns as compared to their heterosexual peers.

Factors related to COVID-19, such as having to stay inside, having normal routines disrupted, being unable to see loved ones, and anxiety around health, are having a detrimental effect on the mental health of many people. These detrimental effects will disproportionately affect those living with long-term mental health conditions. People may be unable to access face-to-face professional support for poor mental health. The high rates of job loss and employment hours reduction suggest that COVID-19 is likely to be magnifying psychosocial distress in the LGBT community, particularly among gay men.

Shortly after the stay-at-home order was issued, we found that 21% of the people sheltering-in-place reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to coronavirus. This rate was significantly higher than the 13% among people who were not sheltering-in-place reporting negative mental health impacts from coronavirus.



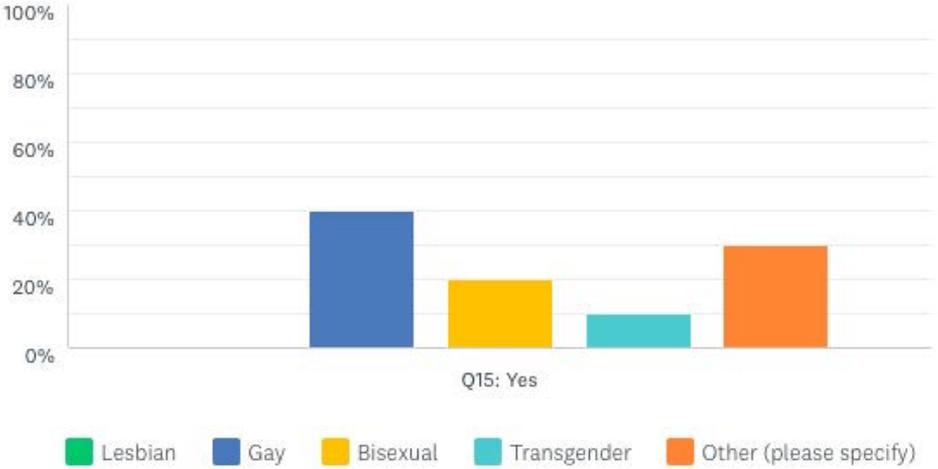


Fig.1 - Requires stress-related support by SOGI<sup>6</sup>

More than likely, the demand for mental health services will continuously increase as people work towards managing the damage done to their mental health during the lockdown. During the shelter-in-place phase, there was much more need for stress-related support from the gay population (40%) and from persons who have identified as pansexual (35%) (Fig.1). Similarly, 48% of the participants reported being unable to seek mental health support at this time, as they cannot access confidential support (18%), or they may not feel that phone or video call support will be helpful (16%), and have opted to wait until they can access face to face support (14%).

<sup>6</sup> Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity



## 2. Isolation

LGBT people, especially older LGBT people, are more likely to be socially isolated. This raises much concern especially during a pandemic when vulnerable people are more in need of emotional and practical support.

Due to family rejection, many LGBT persons have opted to create “chosen families”. This “chosen family” is usually a group of life-affirming persons who take up familial roles in that person’s life, oftentimes replacing their biological family. While physical distancing helps to control the spread of the virus, in most cases isolation separates people from those gratifying social bonds which could have serious implications.

Instead of isolating with their “chosen family”, during a pandemic, people may be required to isolate themselves with biological family members who do not support their way of life. This study showed that 63% of our participants have been isolating with their biological family since the “shelter-in-place” restrictions (Figure 2). The study found that of the 63%, almost half of the amount identified as gay men (47%). Among these gay men, 15% reported needing mental health support but are opting to wait for face to face access.

Of the lesbians who reported they have been isolating with their biological family since the “shelter-in-place” restrictions (18%), 50% reported needing access to safer sex resources and 30% needed contact with community people, groups, etc.

Many LGBT persons are “out” to their friends but not to their biological families. This makes it rare for many LGBT persons to consider their home environment welcoming or safe. This is particularly predominant with LGBT youths.



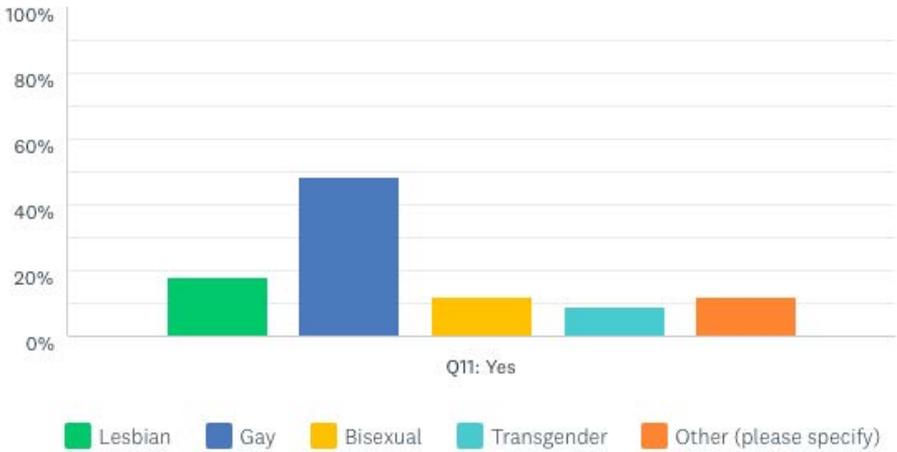


Fig.2 - Isolating with biological family by SOGI

On the other hand, older LGBT persons are faced with the challenge of being surrounded by a support network of friends who are the same age as them. This deprives them of providing practical support to each other such as collecting shopping and medication due to shielding.

Several factors impact the number of people within the LGBT community who have access to the internet. This, therefore, diminishes their ability to connect with people, groups, and services during this time. This survey was carried out online so it is likely that the experiences of these people were not captured.

### 3. LGBT-phobic Family

Many LGBT persons who are isolating with -phobic people will be unable to access support due to fear of outing themselves or causing further conflict. When asked about their ability to access virtual or distance support during COVID-19 restrictions the majority of the concerns about safety when accessing services virtually, each group had concerns with feeling safe to access virtual or distance services at home while isolating (Fig. 3). Therefore, it is likely that LGBT organizations will be under increased pressure once social



distancing measures are loosened and people are able to access face to face confidential support.

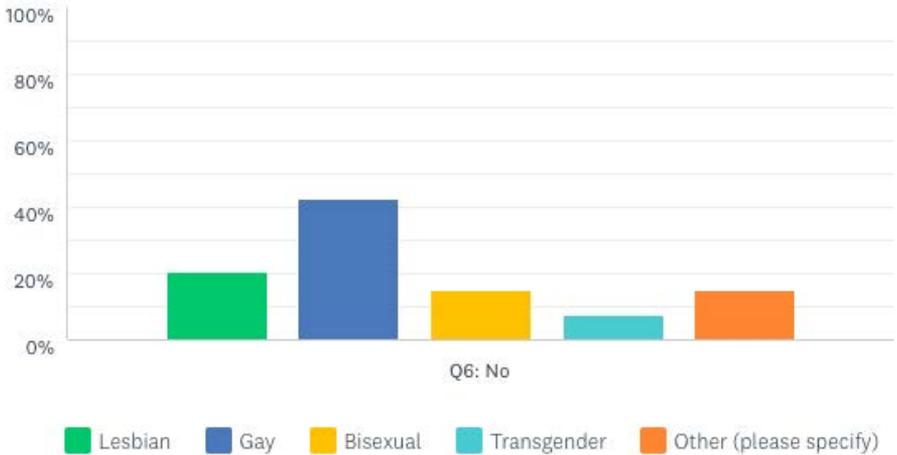


Fig.3 - Not safe to access virtual or distance services at home by SOGI

#### 4. Domestic Violence

Belize has seen a drastic increase in domestic abuse since social distancing measures were introduced. Many LGBT victims are unable to access support as there is little mainstream recognition of domestic abuse that occurs outside of opposite-sex relationships. This lack of recognition also reduces LGBT people’s ability to see themselves as victims. This superfluous ramification may be further intensified by the fact some LGBT people are isolating with LGBT-phobic family members or roommates.

In relation to the intimate partner relationship or being abused in a home they share with family members; it was observed that LGBT persons (85%) are indeed experiencing domestic violence<sup>7</sup> throughout this pandemic. Of the

---

<sup>7</sup> This term is being utilized to represent any person living in the same household as opposed to the legally accepted definition in Domestic Violence Act Chapter 178 of the Laws of Belize



85% who are experiencing domestic violence, 38% identified as lesbians and 39% identified as gay men.

Of the 38% who identified as lesbians experiencing domestic violence, 50% the population was from the Stann Creek District. Only 16% reported having access to safer sex resources and 5% had access to general healthcare.

Of the 39% who identified as gay men experiencing domestic violence, 64% were from the Belize District. Only 3% reported having access to safer sex resources and 2% had access to general healthcare.

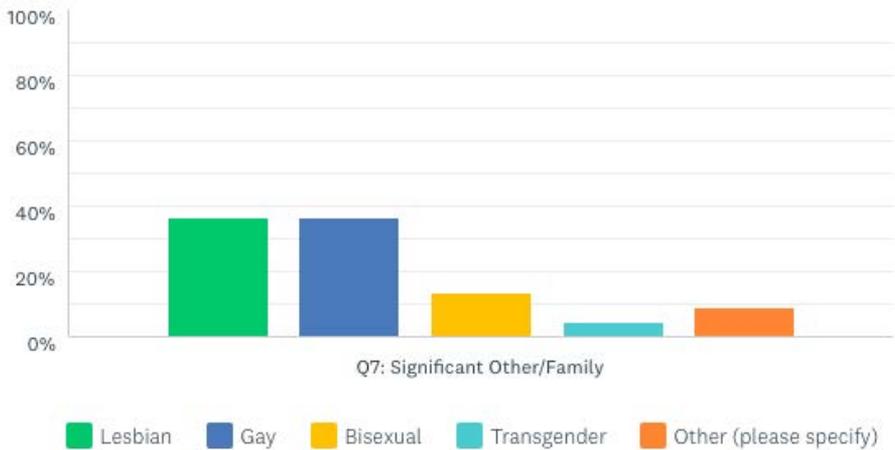


Fig.4 - Experiencing Domestic Violence by SOGI

## 5. Financial Impact

The crisis is having a more profound effect on people in lower socio-economic groups, with lower-paid people more likely to be hit by the economic consequences of the crisis. Although there is a lack of data on poverty and deprivation levels in LGBT communities, the research that exists suggests that groups within LGBT communities are more likely to be worse off financially. Of our survey respondents, 10% said that the Covid-19 crisis has made them have to claim support from the government that they wouldn't usually claim.



When it came to job loss, 48% of the respondents reported losing income or job due to COVID-19. Of that 48% who reportedly loss income, 44% were gay men. 60% of those gay men who were experiencing reduction in income earned less than \$1,000 a month.

Of the 48% who reportedly loss income due to COVID-19, 17% were lesbian women. 30% of the lesbian women who were experiencing reduction in income earned less than \$1,000 a month and of that 30%, more than half (53%) were raising children under the age of 18 years old.

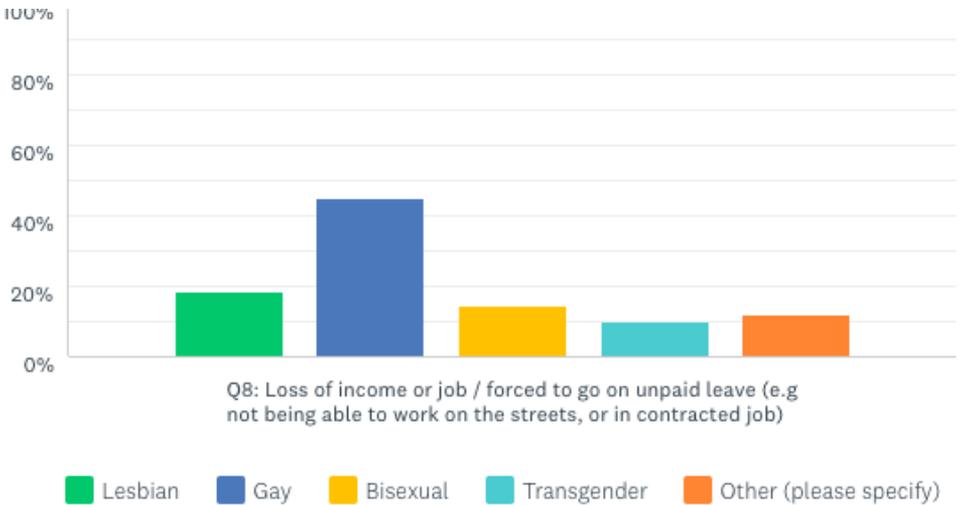


Fig.5 - Experiencing Loss of Income by SOGI



## 6. Access to Healthcare

LGBT people face a number of negative experiences when accessing healthcare, including discrimination, services not meeting their needs, and having to deal with inappropriate questions or unwarranted curiosity about their identity. At a time when our ability to access healthcare and the way we access healthcare has substantially changed, those who faced barriers prior to the crisis may be particularly affected. The survey revealed that respondents had been affected by changes to healthcare, with persons within the age of 19 - 24 more likely to be affected with a 40% impact rate within the community of gay men.

In terms of HIV prevention accessibility, 60% of the participants said they had no intention of accessing HIV-testing services, while only 7% said they had access to condoms. However, the survey did not ask about whether this accessibility had decreased during COVID-19. It did find that people who reported as bisexual had less access to HIV prevention.

**79%**

of the participants had no financial resources to pay for medical treatment

**15%**

of the participants have had difficulties accessing medication

**16%**

of the participants were HIV+/had ongoing medical needs & were unable to maintain treatment



## LGBT COMMUNITIES & SECTOR RESPONSES

LGBT people and organizations have been severely affected by the pandemic; however, there have been a number of examples of new initiatives that aim to support LGBT communities during this crisis.

The volume of services offered and the coverage of the community with prevention and support services has decreased significantly. Most LGBT community organizations are concerned about the sustainability of their work. Several international donors have allowed LGBT organizations to reprogram activities and re-allocate budget funds to serve the needs of clients in light of the COVID-19 emergency.

In general, to cater to the LGBT community during COVID-19, LGBT organizations have had to:

- Expand the list and ensure the quality of online services, and look for new ways to provide them
- Maintain and expand networks of friendly doctors and psychologists working online
- Provide prevention materials to clients through home delivery
- Ensure the digital security of the organization
- Train employees to work online (via remote access and the use of social networks)
- Ensure that offices are of sufficient size and suitably equipped so that employees have safe workplaces, and clients can receive services without the risks associated with airborne infections
- Ensure sanitary conditions in offices – provide protective equipment for staff and clients (masks, disinfectants, gloves)



## SPECIFIC SERVICES OF NGOS TO THE LGBT COMMUNITY

The assessment showed that many community organizations in the country have stopped offline work with clients (6 of the 8 respondents participating in the assessment). For 75% of organizations, the number of clients in the first quarter of quarantine fell by more than half.

In the first quarter of the introduction of restrictive measures, the top three services provided to the LGBT community were COVID-19 Information (75%), food and water (75%), and access to mental health care (62%). Only 38% reported providing emergency contraceptives and HIV/STI testing. The majority of the efforts were concentrated in the Belize District (88%) followed by Cayo District (75%).

Half (50%) of the organizations reported that their impact decreased over the first quarter of quarantine due to less than 10% of their normal clients being able to access their online services. The majority (75%) completely stopped accepting clients or engaging in face-to-face activities with their clients.

The Belize Family Life Association (BFLA) launched an emergency contraceptive and condom distribution system to ensure that all persons, including the LGBT community, have access to safer sex resources during this time.

LGBT groups and organizations such as Our Circle (OC), Belize Youth Empowerment for Change (BYEC), and Trans In Action (TIA) Belize ran events, social and support groups online to reduce isolation and connect LGBT people.

Entities such as Belize Trans Colors (BTC), GoJoven Belize Alumni Association (GoBelize), Collaborative Network of Persons Living with HIV (CNET+), and Trans In Action (TIA) Belize launched care package programs aimed to support the basic needs of the LGBT community, with a focus on the men who have sex with men (MSM) and trans community. Support ranged from food packages to cleaning materials, to assistance with housing support.



EYBM, CNET+, GoBelize, BFLA, and BYEC all reported conducting STI/HIV testing as well as providing emergency contraceptives and the provision of safer sex resources to the LGBT community.

## CONCLUSION

The results obtained from this survey, despite its limitations regarding the scope and representativity of the sample, provide information about some general characteristics of the LGBT community in Belize, which may be of interest when designing and implementing comprehensive responses to the health, socioeconomic, and social situation at present and in the upcoming months.

- A lack of access to social connections within Belize's LGBT community during the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing mental health problems and worsening family conflicts.
- Over half of those surveyed experienced moderate to high levels of worry about their health and financial situation while a third felt disconnected from the wider LGBT community.
- COVID-19 has also complicated access to safer sex resources, HIV/STI testing, and emergency contraceptives.
- LGBT people are now forced to stay at home with non-supportive parents or abusive partners.

