

Grace Cottage Equity Work

Grace Cottage's Equity Team (originally called the Grace Cottage LGBTQ+ Equitable Care Council) was formed in a response to an assessment made by the Leadership team and supported by the Board of Trustees. The team held its first meeting in December 2019. The group includes hospital and clinic providers, nurses, Senior Leadership, and other interested staff.

Thanks to the work of this team, Grace Cottage has earned the top score in Vermont in the last two rounds of the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) Healthcare Equality Index (HEI). In 2022, Grace Cottage (the state's smallest hospital) was one of only two Vermont hospitals to earn the top score; the other was the Veterans Administration Hospital. In 2024, the University of Vermont Medical Center Hospital, the state's largest hospital, joined these two. Grace Cottage is very proud to be a statewide leader in this work, despite its small size.

The work of this group originally centered on language sensitivity and gender-affirming care. Despite the challenge of time and social distancing brought on by the onset of COVID-19, which began when the group was just a few months old, the Equity Team continued to hold meetings and move their objectives forward.

Among the first year's accomplishments (2020):

- Hosted a presentation by the chair of the Brattleboro (VT) Memorial Hospital LGBTQ Council to learn about available resources, trainings, disparities research, and the Healthcare Equities Index
- Created a group charter with priority goals and first actions
- Updated and posted the Grace Cottage Patient Rights & Responsibilities document
- Submitted our first Health Equity Index application
- Printed LGBTQ-friendly-facility logo cards and posted these at all patient registration stations
- Held a virtual unconscious bias training for all staff, presented by the Pride Center (Burlington)
- Obtained pronoun badges that any staff member could choose to wear
- Began revising patient intake forms to allow for recording various pronoun and gender choices

Over the next two years (2021-2022, still during COVID):

- Surveyed staff to obtain baseline measure of comfort with serving LGBTQ+ patients
- Committee members attended a VT Business for Social Responsibility Unconscious Bias training
- Began to discuss broadening the focus to other under-represented groups besides LGBTQ+
- Offered staff a movie showing and book group about Henrietta Lacks, a black woman from whom cells were taken without her knowledge or consent, cells that became important for a variety of medical research. It was many years before her contribution was acknowledged publicly. The book-movie event was offered to staff in Feb. 2022 during Black History Month.
- PowerPoint created to teach patient-facing staff use of new registration forms and EMR screens
- Created screensavers to teach LGBTQ+ sensitive terms to staff
- Offered staff several trainings from the Fenway Institute
- Added a required, one-time, all-staff training module on language and bias
- Changed name to Equity Committee (later changed to Equity Team) and set the goal of becoming obsolete due to DEI awareness being an intrinsic approach to everything that all staff do
- Two community members joined the committee in Jan. 2022
- Began to plan for racial justice component to team's work

- Resolved that “affirming care” is no longer appropriate; shifted to “LGBTQ+ focused care”
- Raised a rainbow flag that flies with the American flag outside the primary care clinic, June 2022
- Registered Grace Cottage providers on the Pride Center’s webpage of recommended providers
- Organized and hosted an online webinar (grant funded by the Vermont Dept. of Health Access) with Out in the Open to show LGBTQ+ participants navigation of VT’s insurance marketplace
- Resubmitted to the Health Equity Index and increased our score by 35 points

2023-present

- Engaged in Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care review of Grace Cottage DEI policies
- Added requirement for all-staff *annual* equity training.
- Added new-staff orientation to Grace Cottage’s equity work
- Added equity speaker to yearly schedule for medical staff continuing education
- Added LGBTQ+ educational resource links to staff intranet
- Ongoing review of all facility policies with consideration of equity issues
- Two providers led a session entitled “LGBTQ+ Primary Care” at the Vermont LGBTQIA+ Health Summit, organized by Out in the Open, Outright Vermont, and the Pride Center in April 2023
- Three providers gave a well-received presentation entitled “Creating LGBTQ+ Affirming Rural Primary Care” at the Northern New England CO-OP of Practice and Community Based Research Network (NNE CO-OP PCBRN) conference in January 2024
- Two committee members have been attending local NAACP antiracist medical group meetings
- In May and June 2024, Grace Cottage’s CHNA process included outreach to historically marginalized groups by sharing the cost of translating our community survey into four other languages beside English (at least one respondent used each of these translations) and holding focus groups to assess the health needs of our newly arrived local immigrants, BIPOC, and homeless populations. Grace Cottage’s CHNA process is a collaborative effort with the two other Windham County, VT, hospitals: Brattleboro Memorial Hospital and the Brattleboro Retreat.

Grace Cottage’s equity work has received public recognition, including the *Brattleboro Reformer’s* 10/10/23 front-page article, “Grace Cottage recognized as major LGBTQ+ ally,” and *Vermont Business Magazine’s* article “Vermont providers embrace equitable health care - and it's good for business.”

The HEI assessments (completed three times, in 2020, 2022, and 2024) have provided a good method to track improvement as the Equity Team works to improve our delivery of equitable health care.

Anecdotally, our staff shows excellent equity competency, as evidenced by patient stories. Speaking in response to participation in an LGBTQ+ focus group as part of the current Community Health Needs Assessment, one LGBTQ+-identified patient said, “You are the best around” for LGBTQ+ focused care.

Evidence of collaboration with community leaders, physicians and others:

As stated above, Grace Cottage’s Equity Team has included members of the medical staff from the very beginning, and they have been fully engaged in this work. In addition, in order to accomplish these initiatives, Grace Cottage’s Equity Team has collaborated with representatives of other Windham County organizations working on equity issues, including Brattleboro Memorial Hospital; LGBTQ+ serving organizations (LGBTQ Council, Out in the Open, and the Burlington-based, statewide-serving Pride Center), and the Windham County United Way, in addition to receiving a small grant from the Vermont Department of Health Access to provide health insurance education to an LGBTQ+ focused audience.

Evidence of success and sustainability of the program or programs in the hospital or community:

The Equity Team's work is ongoing, as is proven by its five-year track record, detailed above. Efforts are underway to update protocols and replace medical equipment in light of anti-racism research and recommendations. Grace Cottage Family Health & Hospital's Senior Leadership and Board of Trustees have all supported the Equity Team's work, in part by providing a budget line for this work and by allowing team members to attend meetings and complete their work while "on the clock." Grace Cottage now has a well-deserved reputation for providing equitable healthcare, and this will continue.