



AIR FORCE DIVERSITY GUIDE:  
**FOR LESBIAN, GAY  
AND BISEXUAL MEMBERS**

Compiled and produced by Air Force Workforce Diversity Director General Personnel–Air Force

**AIR FORCE**



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If you have any further information you would like to see included in this guide, please contact Air Force Workforce Diversity at [RAAFDWD@drn.mil.au](mailto:RAAFDWD@drn.mil.au)



OUR ABILITY TO DELIVER CAPABILITY IN THE  
FUTURE WILL DEPEND ON OUR ABILITY TO  
ATTRACT, RECRUIT AND RETAIN THE VERY BEST  
PERSONNEL FROM EVERY PART OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

## FOREWORD

High calibre people are essential to Air Force's ability to deliver air power. Air Force can be challenging, rewarding, and above all, a unique and different career. Identifying as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (LGB) may add an additional dimension to these challenges and opportunities for some members.

This guide has been designed to assist members, supervisors and Commanders to create more inclusive workplaces and culture for LGB members. It is just one of the many initiatives being developed for LGB members in Air Force. This guide has been developed by Air Force Workforce Diversity staff, in close consultation with members from Air Force's LGB community. All of the quotes in this guide are from currently serving Air Force members.

Our ability to deliver capability in the future will depend on our ability to attract, recruit and retain the very best personnel from every part of the Australian community. I am committed to ensuring that Air Force continues to develop innovative strategies to confirm our place as an employer of choice for all Australians, because our future success as an Air Force depends on it.



Air Marshal Geoff Brown, AO  
Chief of Air Force



## BACKGROUND

This guide has been compiled with the assistance of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Air Force members. They have provided some great advice to help support others who may be facing challenges associated with their sexuality. This guide is not intended to replace or substitute extant Defence and Air Force policy. The guide aims to provide additional information to Air Force members through a friendly, empathetic and relaxed approach based on shared experiences, lessons, advice and tips.

The Air Force can be challenging, rewarding, and above all, a unique and different career. Hopefully, with some advice from this guide, you can get the most out of your time in the Air Force, while also feeling that you don't need to compromise your personal life.

This guide is also intended to help the mates, co-workers, managers and Commanders of LGB personnel to help foster improved understanding and awareness of issues faced by members within their team.

This guide will outline some of the challenges and issues faced by LGB members, followed by some advice and tips from members. It will also outline some policy issues with particular reference to the impact on LGB members. It also includes a list of support organisations and individuals available to provide mentoring and additional support to members.

**Please note that all comments provided through this guide have been sourced directly from currently serving members of Air Force's very supportive LGB community.**



## INTRODUCTION

Sexual orientation is just one of the many facets of a person. For some who fear same-sex attraction, issues pertaining to sexuality can be all consuming. For others, sexuality is little more than a minor detail of their life. For most it falls somewhere in the middle. In an ideal world, a person's sexual orientation would have no impact on their working life, but realistically, sexuality can impact how others perceive members in the workplace.

Being a member of the Air Force is something that all members work hard for, and should be justifiably proud of. Throughout a member's career, they will be presented with many challenges and unique opportunities. Identifying as LGB may add an additional dimension to these challenges and opportunities. The Air Force can be something of a paradox; large and overwhelming but also isolating - like its own little world.

As Air Force continues to evolve new capabilities, the demographics of the organisation are also changing and evolving. The Air Force today is very different to the Air Force some 10 or even five years ago. Air Force continues to see an increased number of members from diverse cultural backgrounds, of both genders, varying ages and who may be same-sex attracted. Air Force values mandate that all members treat each other with mutual respect; this applies to all personnel, irrespective of how they might be 'different' to the majority of Air Force members.

# CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR LGB MEMBERS

While LGB members will face the normal everyday challenges experienced by many members of the Air Force, you may also experience additional challenges, or unique twists on those that are already present.

## Coming Out

Most of us have heard the term 'coming out' but almost everyone has a different interpretation of what coming out actually means. For some people, coming out or 'coming out of the closet' is the process of acknowledging to themselves their attraction to people of the same gender. In the Air Force, you will be faced with a decision to 'come out' or not every time you are posted to a new unit.

People generally associate 'coming out' as the point at which they start to tell other people they're LGB. Some choose to tell only select people whilst others are open about their sexuality with almost everybody. Regardless of how people might interpret coming out, **there is no right or wrong way of being 'out'**. You should not feel pressured into coming out. Some people feel comfortable coming out as teenagers, while others have remained in the closet for many years before finally feeling comfortable enough to tell their families and friends about their sexuality.

**Fear of coming out.** Coming out can be a liberating but also terrifying process for many men and women. You may fear that friends, family, and colleagues will react badly and that you'll be ostracised by the people closest to you. Unfortunately, most people will have heard people referring to homosexuals as 'poofs', 'pansies' and other derogatory terms. These slurs may also include accounts of how homosexuals spread AIDS, how all gay men are effeminate, how lesbian women are overtly masculine and that homosexuality is an illness.

*'My best friend is a fellow airman ... he is definitely one of the blokiest blokes I know. I was terrified of his reaction so I stewed on it for days. I finally got myself ready for whatever he was going to say - I had the worst knot in my stomach so I just blurted it out. "I want to tell you something... I think you should know I'm gay". He just looked up and said "Yeah so what? I don't mind". It was at that point that I realised that maybe I underestimated him and that maybe when I was ready to tell others it might not be received negatively'.*

Despite these myths being proven to be just that – unfounded myths – when those attitudes are present and "normalised", they create hostile environment, which can cause you to feel unnecessarily ashamed. These feelings may cause a strong desire to 'stay in the closet'. Since most LGB people look, act and speak just like their heterosexual counterparts, you may feel staying in the closet is preferable to coming out; thus avoiding a potential negative reaction to same-sex attraction. Many LGB people live in fear of disclosure of their sexual orientation (and the potential negative consequences of disclosure), but consider whether there may be some positive outcomes associated with being open about your sexuality.

*'Choosing who knows or who you tell is YOUR choice'.*



**Why come out?** Sexual orientation is more than simply “what happens in bed”. It encompasses the most important people and events in your life. Re-affirming your sexual orientation may be merely a small part of your life. However, being open about your same-sex attraction can be a very liberating experience for you, your friends, colleagues and families. It can give you the freedom to engage more openly and honestly with colleagues to be yourself.

*‘The biggest lesson I have learnt is that being open removes the gossip and fear factor and normalises being gay.’*

For many people, simply talking about their feelings can be extremely therapeutic. Ultimately though the decision on whether to come out is a deeply personal one. The decision should not be taken lightly, because it will change how you view yourself, and it may change the way others perceive you depending on their pre-existing biases. For many, coming out is a life-changing experience for LGB people and an essential step towards finding self-acceptance and true happiness.

*‘I was posted to a fast jet Squadron, as a pilot, and initially hid my sexuality. With the frustration and continued deception of living a double life, I decided to come out to my peers two years later’.*

**How does this affect me at work?** Hiding the truth about your sexuality can be stressful and builds anxiety. If you are avoiding disclosure, you may avoid talking about your home life, which can lead to people feeling you are being aloof, uncommunicative and/or not being a team player. It also means that Air Force has no formal knowledge of important personal details, such as the need to consider your partner for postings, leave required to care for a sick partner, or most importantly, the requirement to access partner information and support should you fall sick or be injured.

*"My unit has been very accepting of my sexuality and inclusive of my partner at unit functions."*

*'My view point on being a gay man in the Air Force is as long as you do your work and don't try to push your sexuality or life style onto others and don't talk about being gay all the time people will accept you for who you are. Just because I am gay I don't go around telling people and talking about it every 5 mins. Because of my discretion I have always had a happy and friendly relationship with my co-workers'.*

**Coming out at work.** It's a known fact that the average person spends half their waking lives at work. In the Air Force, particularly if you live on-base, 'escaping' work is almost impossible. Not only do you work with your colleagues, you dine with them, exercise with them and socialise with them. This means coming out can have a profound impact on how you are treated by your colleagues - it can be a risky revelation, which has the potential to impact every aspect of your working life.

*'Throughout my whole career (Air Force and Army) I have never come across homophobia. Every member of the Defence Force that I have come across or worked with have only ever been supportive of my sexuality and life style. All of my supervisors have given me time off work for such things as marching in Pride Parades and being involved in DEFGLIS activities'.*

When planning to come out, it is essential to be prepared for what may lie ahead. Honestly assessing the situation and considering the likely reaction of colleagues and superiors is important. If it becomes known in a workplace that you are same-sex attracted, the gossip, baiting and teasing - especially of young people - can be extremely cruel. You need to ask yourself if you can cope with the potential isolation or taunting when unsympathetic uninformed or homophobic workmates find out. Air Force and the ADF doesn't tolerate discrimination in the workplace, but in some scenarios, you can contribute to improving the culture and personality of your workplace simply by being out and being very competent at what you do.

*'I hid my sexual preference until I was completely settled in to my new SQN and was sure I could handle the reaction.'*

*'Coming out at my unit was easy because I had been there for over 4 years and had formed plenty of strong friendships. I believe this is important because your mates will support you and they can help spread the word that being gay doesn't affect the way they feel about you. It is easier to get the message out there when you have advocates on your side as opposed to tackling the situation alone'.*

There are several methods of telling people. Telling someone face-to-face is probably the most common way of coming out and provides the advantage of gauging reaction. The person you are telling could react supportively or may become upset or angry. It's important to be prepared for a range of possible responses. You could consider asking a friend, but it puts them in the position of having to deal with any emotional fallout. Coming out to a group of people is also an option, but somewhat more difficult to orchestrate in the Air Force considering the size of most Squadrons.

*"I found that asking mates to spread the word (of my coming out), took a lot of stress away from me. I had people coming up to me just to say they knew and that they didn't care. It was great."*

**Not Coming Out.** While much of the focus has been on coming out, it is ultimately your own choice. Deciding not to come out is also a legitimate choice. If you choose not to come out, then you need to take into account the stresses associated with this choice as well.

*'I have since been posted to a new SQN where pretty much no one knows my preference as I really don't think its anyone's business'.*

**A note about the impact of not coming out on security clearances.** The security clearance process is designed to ensure members do not hold any 'secrets' that may compromise the member or be used in blackmail/coercion situations. For this reason, a reluctance to come out, or being dishonest during security interview may have implications on your ability to obtain some high-level security clearances.

# THE TOP TIPS FOR LGB MEMBERS ON COMING OUT

It is important to remember that no two coming out experiences are ever the same. The following are based on the observations and experiences of other LGB Air Force members during the preparation of this guide. While they are presented to offer authentic viewpoints, it is important to remember that every situation is unique, and some of these observations may not align with your own personal experiences.

## Preparation

- Drop a few hints to 'test the water'. Sometimes hints are all that's needed to get the ball rolling.
- If there is an unspoken understanding between you and your friends, it might be that they're waiting for you to give them the opportunity to talk to you openly about the subject.
- Friends, family or colleagues may already know more about you than you credit them with.
- Come out to people one at a time and somewhere private; it's easier to reason with an individual than with the group.
- You might want to have your partner with you when coming out for the first time to family or your closest friends. It may be best not to. Let those who love you deal with your bombshell first of all; you can introduce significant others later on and you can always call them after the event for moral support.
- Never come out in an argument or to hurt someone.
- Be sober. Be in control.
- Don't plan on anything else for the rest of the day.

## Questions

- Be ready to talk to your friends for hours on the subject. They'll probably be very curious and want to know what it's about and what it means for your friendship. Make sure you're well informed to make sure you do all this successfully.
- Be ready to be peppered with questions you might rather not answer - be honest and be frank, but don't feel obliged to give any more detail than they would expect from a heterosexual individual.
- Let them know where they can find out more if they are too emotional or afraid to ask you straight away.
- Be prepared for follow-up questions by phone and in person - coming out and coming to terms are an on-going process.



## Reaction

- Make sure you are emotionally prepared for all reactions, good and bad. Some people can be extremely shocked at first, so be patient. Very negative reactions are unlikely, but if they occur, don't let this diminish your resolve.
- People who are ignorant of the facts, or emotionally distressed, may begin by saying things that are hurtful without quite realising what they are saying. Remember that they may also be experiencing turmoil too. You have also dropped a big revelation that they most likely weren't prepared for and are asking them to adjust and accept it immediately – it might have taken you years to come to terms with your sexuality!
- Be ready for people to need time and space to think about things before any discussion takes place. With that in mind – when telling family, don't leave telling people until the last day of your visit home - do it half way through.
- Make sure people are in no doubt before you leave that it is your life to live, you only have one, and the bottom line is that you are going to continue living as a gay person no matter what their reaction is.
- Unfortunately, you need to consider that you may lose a friend or family members during this process. In some people the revulsion to homosexuality is so deeply-rooted they simply cannot overcome it.

*'When I finally came out to my family, it felt like a giant weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I'd resolved never to tell them and so I carried around this burden with me every time I went home. My parents didn't disown me, my sister had already guessed ... there was shock and tears ... but it ended up with them reaffirming their love for me. It made me confident to be myself at work, and I'll never carry that burden again.'*

## Harassment and Bullying

Air Force is a unique working environment. Whether new to a unit or not, how a workplace operates and functions is always an important consideration. Since people spend a lot of time at work, whether it is a positive or negative environment can have an enormous impact. Honestly only you can decide what type of workplace you have but if you feel harassed, bullied or just uncomfortable being there, there are support methods and agencies that can help.

Unfortunately, despite all efforts to eliminate harassment and bullying, it still occurs in some workplaces. The issue is certainly not unique to Air Force; harassment and bullying exists across all communities and in numerous workplaces. Like many workplaces, Air Force has a zero tolerance policy towards harassment and bullying. There is no definitive list as to what constitutes harassment or bullying, but as a general guide, if you are made to feel uncomfortable, are put down or generally treated differently in an adverse way, this constitutes harassment or bullying. Harassment and bullying can be perpetuated by anybody, including peers, subordinates and superiors.

*'I just went on day by day hating the thought of going to work, having to put up with all the crass remarks and name calling. I had to pretend that it didn't phase me because "That's just the way the ADF is" as soon as someone knows that they are getting to you it only goes downhill'.*

If you feel you are being bullied or harassed then it needs to be reported to your supervisor or Commander immediately, so they can take action to stop it from happening. It is also helpful to keep clear and accurate records of any incidents; what happened, when it happened, who was involved, and how the incident was reported. This record may be useful should the situation escalate into formal disciplinary action.

**Who to speak to about being harassed or bullied.** If you feel that you are being bullied or harassed, the very first person you should talk to is the perpetrator of the unacceptable behaviour. Some people may not be aware of the impact of their words or actions, and just advising them of how you feel may be enough to make the behaviour stop.

*'One of my so called close friends betrayed me by outing me to all of the SQN. Slowly but surely I became the "butt of all jokes" and not only was I ridiculed daily but I heard some of the most disgusting and downgrading things said about me and my sexuality. It was terrifying, I didn't know who I could talk to at the SQN, everybody I knew was from the SQN so I didn't feel I could talk to them as my trust had already been broken once'.*

If you feel unable to speak directly about the issue with the person or people involved, there are a number of other options. Here is a list of people who might be able to provide advice, support or even just an empathetic ear:

- Friends – especially empathetic and trustworthy friends who have an appreciation of your situation.
- A Chaplain – don't worry about the religious aspects of speaking to a Chaplain – they are non-judgemental, independent counsellors who are willing to listen to all member's concerns.

- A counsellor or psychologist – most people have seen a counsellor or psychologist at some point in their life. Whether you are going through a rough patch or just need someone to talk to, these professionals are there to help and listen. You can access these services through a doctor via your local medical facility or via the Defence All Hours Support Line - 1800 628 036 or +61 2 9426 3878.
- Your chain of command – Supervisors are entrusted with commanding and managing ALL personnel within their chain of command, and they have a mandate to resolve any workplace issues. Most supervisors will have experience that can prove invaluable when managing complex or difficult personnel situations.
- Defence Gay and Lesbian Information Service (DEFGLIS) – is an Air Force and ADF community, comprising of LGBTI members from a variety of ranks and Services. DEFGLIS members actively provide peer-support and networking opportunities for LGBTI members. Given the breadth of experience and knowledge of its members, there is a strong chance that a DEFGLIS member has experienced something similar to your current situation and will be able to give sound, practical advice.
- Equity Advisor – An alternate option is the Equity Advisor (EA) network. Each unit is staffed with at least one EA who is trained to assist members to resolve equity complaints. Members may also seek counsel from EAs outside their unit; these contacts are available through the base Senior EA or the Defence Equity Advice Line.

*'If you want to talk to someone but you don't know who - then seek out a member of DEFGLIS. They were a fantastic support for me and I am sure they will be for you as well'.*

## HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

**Illicit substances.** When socialising, it is possible that LGB members, like other members of the Air Force community, may encounter the use of illicit substances. As members of the Air Force, it's important to recognise that illicit substance use isn't compatible with Air Force's mission or culture. Defence has a zero-tolerance policy regarding illicit substances and members should be cautious about being drawn into activities that could place their health and job at significant risk.

**Sexual Health.** Engaging in safe sex is just smart for everyone to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Men who have sex with men in particular should recognise that they are at higher risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Get the facts and advice on a range of health issues that can affect LGB persons at ACON: [www.rightnow.acon.org.au](http://www.rightnow.acon.org.au).



## THE IMPACT OF SAME-SEX ATTRACTION ON YOUR AIR FORCE CAREER

There is no job that is not accessible to you because you are same-sex attracted. There are many senior airmen and officers who are an important part of the Air Force, and have been promoted based on their performance - without any consideration for your sexual-orientation.

*"In Air Force, your mates can become your family, which can make it seem harder to come out. But modern attitudes and familiarity with diversity issues often means that Air Force colleagues will be the first to support you."*

There are competing priorities throughout every Air Force member's life. While an Air Force career necessitates certain priorities at certain times, work should not come at the expense of a your personal life. Work-life balance is important to your well being and to your family. Policy considerations that may be relevant for LGB Air Force members are detailed below.

### Relationship Recognition

*'To be able to be yourself and have your relationship recognised has given me a feeling of acceptance in not having to hide a big part of my life. Being comfortable with who you are with the knowledge that you won't be discriminated against enables you to really be true to yourself'.*

Having an interdependent partnership (IDP) recognised is one issue that you may want to consider. DI(G) PERS 53-1 *Recognition of interdependent partnerships* outlines the official Defence policy and processes for recognition. If you are in a long-term relationship you need to understand the evidence required to support such an application, and you should make effort immediately to obtain this evidence. Don't wait until you are potentially posted away from your partner to start the application process.

If you have had your relationship recognised as a civil partnership (available to be registered in some jurisdictions), this process does not formalise the relationship in legal terms. Therefore, you will also need to have the relationship recognised as an IDP to access certain entitlements and support within the ADF.

Once this recognition has taken place then there are extra considerations when it comes to postings (particularly for two serving members in a relationship) and there may also be a change to entitlements (for example, service residences for housing). It is important to consider having your relationship formally recognised, especially due to posting considerations and having dependents be considered as part of the process (particularly for dual serving members).

It is also important to consider the implications of not having the relationship recognised, particularly in regard to deployment. If you become ill or injured, your partner may not be able to access the support, services and entitlements made available by Defence. Another important factor for consideration is notifying the National Welfare and Coordination Centre of your wishes regarding people who are authorised to contact them on the your behalf when deployed.

**Approval process.** A unit Commanding Officer (CO) may approve an IDP application only if the 90 day co-habitation requirement is met (along with the extra four pieces of evidence that is required). If you have been living with your partner for at least 90 days, and can provide all of the rest of the evidence required, then the IDP can be approved at the unit level. However, for a variety of reasons, if you have not lived with your partner for 90 days or longer, the application can be referred to Personnel Concepts & Policy within DGPERS-AF for approval. Examples include two serving members who have not been posted together in the same location or partnerships that involve children and limited space in the usual residence.

## Parental Considerations

Parents in a same-sex relationship who become parents of a newborn or adopted dependent child have access to paid parental leave and unpaid parental leave as outlined in PACMAN.

These leave provisions are separate to the Government's Paid Parental Leave scheme that is run by the Family Assistance Office. While not a leave provision, it provides a payment to complement leave. Before claiming Paid Parental Leave Scheme, you should discuss intended absences and ADF parental leave with your supervisor.

You can find further information within the ADF Pay and Conditions Manual, and the Family Assistance office [www.familyassist.gov.au](http://www.familyassist.gov.au).

## Promotion and Career potential

*'My career was compromised at one stage which I believe was a result of homophobia. I had a senior member of staff (who at the time was my boss) express his distaste for my/our sexuality. It was devastating!'*

Air Force has come a very long way since the 1992 policy change that allowed gay and lesbian members to serve in the ADF. Air Force has had openly gay and lesbian members promoted to star rank, appointed as Commanding Officer's of operational flying squadrons and promoted to the highest-level enlisted ranks. Feedback from those members has been that their sexual orientation has not been a factor in their promotion/appointment, and has not even entered into consideration/discussion. There has generally been an open and accepting environment for personnel to serve in any leadership capacity.

*'I had, before coming out, been selected for a three year exchange posting overseas. Coming out, just prior to my posting caused some "discussions" up the command chain of which had no impact on the outcome. I subsequently spent an amazing three years flying jets overseas without any negative or derogatory comments regarding my sexuality. I returned to Australia following the posting and since that time all personnel have been aware of my sexuality and I have never had a malicious comment made toward me in all that time. I presently work in a Squadron with seven openly gay members'.*

## THE IMPACT AN AIR FORCE CAREER HAS ON BEING SAME-SEX ATTRACTED

### Being you

It is important to feel that you are able to just be yourself. Don't feel pressured into changing your personality to accommodate the majority of personnel in the workplace. An inclusive workplace means accepting everyone for who they are, irrespective of their age, gender, sexual preference, religion, marital status and cultural background. You should not feel the need to put on a façade at work; adopting a 'fake' persona will only lead to unhappiness and a lack of willingness to remain in the Air Force. All members who demonstrate and personify the RAAF values should feel empowered to be themselves.

### Staying in touch

Members posted within close range of their hometown will have ready access to a great support network in existing family and friends. Unfortunately most people will probably be posted away from their home location during their career. Whether close to or far away from your support network, keeping in contact with friends and family is important, whether by phone, Facebook, Skype or writing by mail. Good day, bad day, or anything in between - your family will most likely want to hear from you. It is important to maintain close connections with family and friends who you trust. Support networks are an essential part of dealing with the stresses and challenges you will face during your career.

## Locational instability and remoteness

Being posted around means that you will encounter the 'coming-out' decision at a far greater frequency than the rest of the population. It is important to remember that each workplace and environment is different – be prepared to face this challenge and contribute to creating an inclusive Air Force Culture.

Dating can be a difficult at the best of times. Being a member of the Air Force, it is expected that at some point you will be posted to different localities, will be required to travel away for courses or exercises, or even be away for months on deployment. This can make dating hard, particularly becoming familiar with new networks and social groups. However, you should always be open and honest about what your career involves, and be realistic with yourself about what you can commit to and when.

Most bases are located away from the local city or town centre. This can have an impact on your access to social events and places during down time. While the vast majority of Australians are open and accepting of the LGB community and the Air Force, unfortunately assaults are still prevalent in our society. LGB members can be a target in less accepting locations. For this reason, you should be extra careful about your personal safety at all times. Going out and staying with a group of friends can help to keep you safe.

## Building networks in new locations

While all members of the Air Force need to establish new networks and support in each location when they are posted, this can be more difficult for LGB members. One advantage you have as an Air Force member, is that you have access to a ready-made network of people who can provide advice, support and mentoring (see a list of contacts at the end of this guide).

*'Once I got to my Squadron I met two other members who were gay and they told me about DEFGLIS... after that I realised that it was ok to be gay and I wouldn't get kicked out because of it.'*

DEFGLIS provides a ready-made support network for you and through DEFGLIS you will be able to connect with other LGBTI member at your new base/locality. Other ways to find and build new support networks are:

- Get involved with your local LGBTI community – your local community is always looking for volunteers to support one another. If you don't know anyone else, put your Air Force connections to good use, and meet new people while your are strengthening your local community. The DEFGLIS website also maintains a list of LGBTI community resources in every state
- Pride in Diversity hold regular networking events in each state. DEFGLIS advertises these events and as employees of Defence, we are automatically invited because Defence is a member. These events provide a great way to connect with LGBTI networks in business.
- Pick up your local LGBTI newspaper or read it online. The Star Observer, Gay News Network and SameSame are national LGBTI news services who have a lot of information about what is happening in the community. You'll most likely find a community event that interests you.

# GUIDANCE FOR COMMANDERS AND MANAGERS

Managing or commanding an Air Force member who identifies as LGB should, in theory, be no different to any other Air Force member. However, as can be seen from the previous parts of this guide, there are certain areas in which a little understanding and care can have a great impact for these members.

## The Commander's impact

A Commander or a Manager has a powerful role in setting the tone and defining the degree of inclusion within your team. Your leadership and attitude towards LGB members will have a strong impact on whether LGB members feel they can be themselves in the workplace, and how others treat them. LGB members who have to hide their sexual orientation are not performing at their best, because they need spend a significant amount of their available capacity hiding this aspect about themselves. Spending time ensuring a moderate workplace that encourages everyone to be themselves allows the Air Force to capitalise on the strengths of all individuals and reduces the likelihood that you will need to deal with unacceptable behaviour within your unit.

Managing or commanding a gay or lesbian member may seem a daunting experience for a supervisor or commander, influenced by either personally held beliefs, a lack of understanding or awareness of the issues, or in some cases, minimal understanding or experience with gay or lesbian people. However, it is important to treat LGB members the same as any other Air Force member under your command, regardless of sexuality. There is support available to commanders and supervisors - please see the support available section of this guide.

## Harassment and Bullying

Anti-gay attitudes and harassment is one of the most pervasive, frightening, and potentially damaging threats members can face. If a member is being bullied, called names, threatened, or physically harmed at their workplace because of their sexual orientation, it is a command responsibility to act to stop the harassment and rectify the situation. If the Chain of Command (CoC) does not do anything to protect the member, they can be held liable.

The impact harassment can have on members should not be underestimated; it has the potential to effect the member both personally and professionally. As one airman reflects, a time on overhearing two colleagues making derogatory remarks about his sexuality:

*'This was the point that I felt I had lost the fight for Equality within my Squadron. I started contemplating leaving the RAAF. I started participating in self destructive activities (such as binge drinking) and my self-esteem was broken. Although I had to stay at the SQN, I lost my spark and my drive to be at work or participate in SQN activities. I never wanted to be around anyone and I became reclusive'.*

Allowing inappropriate jokes, attitudes or comments which marginalise LGB persons is equally damaging to an inclusive workplace culture, especially considering that its very difficult to know whether there is an LGB person within the unit or not. If an LGB person has made a decision to not be out, it's very unlikely they will come forward to report unacceptable behaviour.

**The member's colleagues, supervisors, chain of command or anyone in their workplace does NOT have the right to "out" someone without the affected member's permission. This can have tragic and dire consequences. Threatening to disclose private information violates a member's right to privacy.**

*'One of my so called close friends betrayed me by outing me to all of the Squadron. Slowly but surely I became the "butt of all jokes" and was not only ridiculed daily but I heard some of the most disgusting and downgrading things said about me and my sexuality. It was terrifying, I didn't know who I could talk to at the Squadron, everybody I knew was from the Squadron so I didn't feel I could talk to them as my trust had already been broken once. I was so scared that I wouldn't even talk to medical staff or the chaplains about it... I just went on day by day hating the thought of going to work, having to put up with all the crass remarks and name calling'.*

## **Moving beyond assumptions to an inclusive workplace**

We all make assumptions and rely on stereotypes in most aspects of our lives; it's the mechanism the brain uses to expedite the processing of information. However, these assumption and stereotypes can be hurtful to people, when you incorrectly assume something about them.

Heterosexual people "display" their sexual orientation, often unconsciously. Displays may include openly talking about their wife/husband/boyfriend etc, displaying photographs of their partner on their desk, bringing their partner to the Mess for work/social events and actively taking advantage of the support offered to families of ADF personnel. It is often assumed someone is married to a person of the opposite gender; members are usually asked about their family situation during initial conversations in every workplace. This can make LGB members feel extremely uncomfortable and reinforce to them the need to hide their same-sex attraction.

If an LGB member feels the need to hide their orientation, they also need to hide any evidence of a partner. If someone is being evasive regarding details about their personal life, they may not be comfortable coming out. It is important to recognise when someone is being evasive and check whether your behaviour might be creating an environment where an LGB member feels they can't be themselves.

*'I went through my initial recruit and employment training feeling quite alone. I remember thinking that there must not be anyone else in the RAAF or wider Defence Force who was gay. I thought I was the only one, I felt so alone and afraid of what the other members would think'.*

## What you can do to help

Listed below are some ways Commanders and all members can begin to identify and change the way they approach situations and phrase conversation, to avoid incorrectly assuming member's personal circumstances.

**Think about how you frame your personal questions and statements.** Social interactions and developing friendships with our peers is what makes our organisation such a fantastic place to work. However, try to think about your own automatic assumptions, before asking a personal question. For example, in a conversation with a new colleague or staff member, asking if they have a 'partner' is a more assumption-free question than asking if they are 'married'. And if they do have a partner, you might ask 'what do they do for a living' instead of automatically assuming the partner is of the opposite sex. This applies to a range of social scenarios – try to think before you ask!

**Let others volunteer personal information.** This point relates to the previous point; sometimes even fairly innocent questions might hurt, offend or alienate. For example, asking somebody 'how old are your kids?', 'or do you have kids?' are not normally hurtful questions, but they may be distressing to a member who has been trying to become a parent through assisted fertility or adoption. Work-based friendships are obviously based on getting to know somebody at a personal level, but sometimes it may be wise to wait until personal information is given voluntarily, instead of asking. Again – think before you ask.

**Check to make sure any planned social activities are not based on assumptions.** Social activities, such as a 'meet-and-great' BBQ for the 'wives' to meet each-other, clearly assumes that a) all partners must be women and b) that all members must be married! Check to make sure that any planned social activities and invitations to activities encompass members/families who may not fit into your assumed construct of a 'typical' family.

**Check lesson plans and instructor guides to ensure training scenarios encompass a range of different family/life scenarios.** To educate others that there are many different types of people, families and lifestyles in the Air Force, instructional staff should endeavour to make sure that they aren't perpetuating any assumptions when designing training packages at all levels of training. Commanders might consider asking their training staff to run an 'assumption check' to ensure there is a balanced approach taken in all areas of our training.

**Remind personnel about their own assumptions in the workplace.** If you notice other members of staff are expressing assumptions that may alienate some staff, speak up and try to guide others regarding how their assumptions may be impacting others. Often people may be quite unaware of how their statements, questions and activities may serve to alienate and offend their co-workers/team-members/staff.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

### **Support and Resources**

Specifically for Defence members, the Defence Gay and Lesbian Information Service (DEFGLIS) is an organisation that provides support, advice, advocacy and networking events for defence members. DEFGLIS maintains a list of local LGBTI community resources available in each locality where Defence members are posted. More information can be found at their website [www.defglis.com.au](http://www.defglis.com.au)

Pride in Diversity, is a not-for-profit organisation to assist organisations with the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex people.

<http://www.prideindiversity.com.au/>

### **Ambassadors**

Air Force is in the process of creating the LGBTI Ambassador network, a group of mentors and support contacts who will be available to assist other LGBTI members on a range of issues. The Ambassador network will be published on the DGPERS-AF Intranet page.

[www.airforce.gov.au](http://www.airforce.gov.au)