What it takes for health systems to lead on LGBTQ+ patient care

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More than 900 health care facilities took active part in the most recent edition of the Human Rights Campaign’s “Healthcare Equality Index,” the country’s foremost benchmarking survey of health care organizations’ policies and practices dedicated to the equitable treatment and inclusion of their LGBTQ+ patients, visitors and employees.

“Every person deserves to have access to quality health care, be respected and heard by their doctor, and feel safe in the facility where they are receiving care,” said Tari Hanneman, the director of health and aging at the Human Rights Campaign, a Washington-based LGBTQ+ advocacy organization widely known for its major role in the successful expansion of marriage rights.

“But LGBTQ+ people are often subject to discrimination in all spaces, including health care facilities, which leads to members of the community avoiding care and anticipating our voices will not be respected in an incredibly vulnerable environment,” she said.

The health care organizations taking part in the Healthcare Equality Index, whose results were released last year, “are truly pioneering the health care industry by implementing robust, comprehensive LGBTQ+ inclusive policies that hopefully, because of their work, will become standard practice,” Hanneman added.

The index evaluates and scores health care facilities on detailed criteria falling under four central pillars:

- Foundational policies and training.
- LGBTQ+ patient services and support.
- Employee benefits and policies.
- Patient and community engagement.

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Nearly 500 facilities earned the Human Rights Campaign’s “LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leader” designation, receiving the maximum score in each section and earning an overall score of 100.

Among them are these members of the AMA Health System Program, which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

1 Atlantic Health System
This marked the fourth consecutive year that all of the New Jersey health system’s medical centers—Morristown, Overlook, Newton, Chilton and Hackettstown medical centers and Goryeb Children’s Hospital—earned this designation.

“Atlantic Health System is dedicated to the belief that every patient, visitor and team member is deserving of a welcoming and inclusive health care environment,” said Armond Kinsey, the health system’s chief diversity officer. Learn more about Atlantic Health System.

2 Henry Ford Health
All five hospitals within Henry Ford Health earned the designation, for the third consecutive year. Henry Ford was one of only two health care organizations in Michigan recognized as an LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leader.

Earning the highest rating on the “latest Healthcare Equality Index is inspiring and a true reflection of Henry Ford Health’s caring environment, driven by our compassionate team members,” according to Kimberlydawn Wisdom, MD, MS, the health system’s senior vice president of community health and equity, and also its chief wellness and diversity officer.

“This honor recognizes our commitment to providing equitable and inclusive care and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning patients and employees, and ensures we are regularly assessing our success in driving inclusive policies and best practices by submitting our data for evaluation,” Dr. Wisdom added. Learn more about Henry Ford Health.

3 Kaiser Permanente
The most recent Healthcare Equality Index marked the 12th time in a row that this integrated health system was recognized by the Human Rights Campaign, with all 39 of its hospitals earning the LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leader designation.

Each participating Kaiser Permanente hospital completed more than 16,000 hours of LGBTQ+ training and demonstrated outstanding commitment to providing welcoming and inclusive care, community engagement and equitable employment practices. Kaiser Permanente’s care delivery is led by the physicians of the Permanente Medical Groups. Learn more about Permanente Medicine.

Virginia Mason Franciscan Health
The health system’s Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle earned the designation for its dedication to the equitable treatment and inclusion of their LGBTQ+ patients, visitors and employees.

“The LGBTQ+ community has historically encountered barriers to accessing critical care and unfortunately, continue to contend with these challenges today,” said Sydney Bersante, interim president of the Virginia Mason Medical Center. “As part of our commitment to ensuring access to inclusive care, we are dedicated to providing welcoming, compassionate care to our LGBTQ+ patients and their families.” Learn more about Virginia Mason Franciscan Health.

Another 251 health care facilities earned the “Top Performer” designation, with scores between 80 and 95 points and at least partial credit in each section. Among those landing the honor were facilities that are part of these AMA Health System Program member organizations.

Bayhealth
The Delaware health system has continues to grow its emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion for all of its patients. That includes its LGBTQ+ patients and their families. The Sussex and Kent campuses of Bayhealth Hospital earned scores of 95.

Bayhealth offers a safe place where LGBTQ+ patients can access individual and family-based care with respect and honesty. The organization’s staff and physicians have been
trained to meet the unique health needs of the LGBTQ+ community, and Bayhealth lists physicians who specialize in LGBTQ+ services. Learn more about Bayhealth.

2 Sanford Health
Sanford Medical Center Fargo, part of Sanford Health, was named a top performer. Michael Burson, a senior social worker at the Sanford Roger Maris Cancer Center in Fargo, North Dakota, helped lead the process that led to the honor.

“What we’re seeing is that there is a deep and urgent need in the LGBTQ community,” Burson said. “Essentially, many of the members of this community have lost trust in the medical field and it is having grave impact on their health.”

Shelby Terstriep, MD, a Sanford Health medical oncologist, was instrumental in landing a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention grant to help address health inequities. The effort originated with Dr. Terstriep’s conversations with several of her lesbian patients about ways that physicians and other health professionals could do things differently.

“We have an organized department looking at equitable health care now,” Dr. Terstriep said. “We have policies and procedures that focus on issues that we might not have thought about in the past and wording and language that we wouldn’t have noticed before.” Learn more about Sanford Health.

According to the Human Rights Campaign, 99% of facilities taking part in last year’s Healthcare Equality Index documented that they include both “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” in their patient and employment nondiscrimination policies. The next Healthcare Equality Index report will be published in 2024, with the survey for that report launching this month.

Learn how the AMA Foundation seeks to dramatically shape the future of LGBTQ+ health through its National LGBTQ+ Fellowship Program.

And find out more about the AMA Advisory Committee on LGBTQ Issues, which highlights LGBTQ+ news and topics related to patients and physicians.