

UTOPIA 2018 Group Health Presentation

1. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?



UTOPIA values Diversity

“Fa’afafine/Fa’atane” | “In the manner of a woman/of a man.” – Samoa

Terms used to describe gender diverse individuals in the Samoan community. UTOPIA and this community is unapologetically fa’afafine. Our strength as a community is in our diversity of stories, experiences, and identities.

UTOPIA was born out of the struggles, challenges, strength, and resilience of the Pacific Islander LGBTQI community in the Seattle area. A group of transgender-identified friends met to raise funds for those affected by the 2009 earthquake and tsunami in the South Pacific. We realized that Pacific Islanders were often left out of resources that were available under the API umbrella and have limited access to healthcare, employment, education, and leadership opportunities. And LGBTQI members of the Pacific Islander community have been even further marginalized. Our work to support QTPI (queer and trans Pacific Islanders, or “Q-T-pie”) arises directly out of the struggles and challenges this community faces. UTOPIA was founded to provide a safe, welcoming, and supportive space for members of the QTPI community in the region.

Ever since then, UTOPIA has worked to create a vibrant space for members of our community to address basic needs, build pathways toward new expanded career and life opportunities, foster a sense of common purpose, and advocate for social justice, education and overall wellness among members of the QTPI community. We are a transgender and *fa’afafine*-led, member-based organization, and our work is driven by a deeply dedicated group of community volunteers. From the very start, our work has been steeped in the barriers, challenges and experiences of Pacific Islander members of the LGBTQI community who face pervasive racism, homophobia and transphobia in ways that impact their safety, health, sense of wellness, and their desire to build a positive future. Over the past seven years, compelling needs and emerging trends have shaped the work we do as well as the unique and important place we hold for Seattle’s Pacific Islander LGBTQI community.

We provide frontline support and advocacy to people for whom gender identification has resulted in harassment, discrimination, severely limited work opportunities and even criminalization. As a people we are exponentially disenfranchised: we are marginalized within the queer community because we are Pacific Islanders, within the Pacific Islander community because we are *fa’afafine*. Sex workers, those with disabilities or addictions, immigrants and the poor are even more so. Within mainstream society, we are simultaneously both invisible and hypervisible as *other* and as targets for discrimination, abuse, and violence. This is the backdrop for our work, and it is why UTOPIA is such a vital landing place for the QTPI community in the Seattle/Tacoma area.

All UTOPIA work is oriented towards providing the services, resources, support, political education, and cultural community QTPI need to collectively address both basic needs and discriminatory systems. As a largely volunteer-run network, leaders who come into UTOPIA in turn become an active part of running our programming. Programs are chosen by members to address the issues impacting them most, from conversations with local faith leaders to organizing QTPI baggage handlers at SeaTac airport to win gender inclusive restrooms. Over the past seven years, our work has evolved to include five major areas of focus, including:

- **Health and Safety:** We provide safety and sanctuary for our community members, many of whom routinely experience hate, harassment and abuse from the white community, as well as rejection and disconnection from within the Pacific Islander community. In particular, we serve as a trusted, culturally aligned resource for Pacific Islanders in the LGBTQI community, in helping them access transgender health services, housing and other services. We provide support groups and assistance for Pacific Islanders in the sex industry, providing testing kits, HIV prevention and screening, and contraceptives and other important healthcare resources. We also work to connect QTPI to healthcare resources like insurance and preventative care to address health disparities.
- **Education and Employment:** Our work revolves around addressing the discrimination our community faces in pursuing educational and employment opportunities. We see how prevailing prejudice against transgender people has resulted in limited job opportunities, leading many to sex work and subsequent incarceration, which further limits opportunities for employment. Toward this end, we help QTPI with resources, support and career guidance for when they are ready to leave the sex industry and pursue higher education and employment opportunities. We seek to destigmatize sex work while highlighting self-worth, survival and liberation.
- **Support for Immigrants:** For those in the LGBTQI community who have newly emigrated from the Pacific Islands, we provide short-term housing and help them obtain the services they need while also standing with them in challenging race- and gender-based discrimination in areas of employment, housing, education and everyday life. We provide interpretation services to parents of QTPI students as well as other who need help navigating resources as they apply for college and work to build a new life in this country.
- **Advocacy:** UTOPIA is a cornerstone advocate for Pacific Islanders in the LGBTQI Community. We advocate to address discrimination and other issues that impact our entire community, as well as providing individual advocacy in helping our members to access the services, benefits and justice for which they are entitled.
- **Community Building:** UTOPIA is also about building a sense of community, shared purpose and connection among our members through our annual events and gatherings, and an annual Trans Day of Remembrance to honor those we have lost, too often due to violence and hate. We've developed an All Trans Chorus as a mechanism for healing from the trauma of rejection and abuse, as well as a way of celebrating our lives through creative expression. The Chorus is especially important for people in transition who need space to train their new voices.

2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?



UTOPIA values Teamwork

"Galulue faatasi e māmā ai se 'avega" | "Working together lightens the load." – Samoa

UTOPIA believes in collaboration and teamwork with a focus on a common team goal enhances the quality and effectiveness of our work and services.

We are a transgender-led, member-based organization, and our work is driven by a deeply dedicated community of QTPI. UTOPIA's first strategy is to be present, in the streets and alleys, the coffee shops and bars, the very places where transgender women face the greatest risks to their safety and well-being. For this reason, we locate our street outreach team in close proximity to the people who need us. Secondly, our work is driven by the expressed needs, interests and safety of the people we serve. In this regard, we have no prescribed intervention, no predetermined formula except to help people in securing the resources that ensure their safety and well-being and support them in exploring their options. Now, and in the months ahead, we seek to significantly increase street-level support and individual advocacy that addresses safety and survival, as well as resource referral that helps Pacific Islander and other transgender youth and young adults in the sex industry build a pathway to a better, more sustainable future.

UTOPIA is a dynamically welcoming community that builds a network of support around the people we serve; everyone who walks in our door becomes family. Since we come from the community we serve, all UTOPIA programming is by and for QTPI. We build in constant opportunities for evaluation and feedback from our participants. We do one-on-one interviews and surveys at our our regular programming meetings and our board offers both guidance and suggestions for work that supports this community. We do regular strategic planning with our leadership team, engaging community members fully in our long-term planning process.

3. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?



UTOPIA values Dignity

"'Ukuli'i ka pua, onaona I ka mau'u" | "Tiny is the flower, yet it scents the grass around it." – Hawaii

One person can make a significant impact in the universe. We at UTOPIA believe in the importance and worth of every person in a society, we aim to assist in building that leadership. We value dignity and believe that everyone is worthy of honor and respect.

Hateful rhetoric at the national level, combined with a pervasive undercurrent of homophobia, has fueled a spike of violence and threats to Seattle's LGBTQI community. Our transgender community endures increased threats, including several acts of violence and hate. We face harassment at the workplace, bullying in schools, taunts in bars and restaurants, assaults on the streets. Every day holds its own possibility for hate, abuse and discrimination, to the point where transgender women of color feel increasingly unsafe, unwelcome and at imminent risk. And while these factors are not entirely new to us, the increased ferocity and frequency of the time serves to heighten the already formidable challenges facing transgender women from the Pacific Islander community.

Because UTOPIA serves a population that is impacted by oppression on so many levels, our understanding must be highly intersectional as well; we refuse to leave behind any aspect of ourselves in our work for the liberation of QTPI people. We are concerned addressing both the immediate physical safety of our community and the systems, policies, and beliefs that make us unsafe. Health disparities are extremely high within our community:

- Asian American, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders have higher rates of cancer, hepatitis, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, tuberculosis, obesity, and mental health issues.
- Pacific Islanders have significantly higher rates of HIV/AIDS and STDs than white Americans.
- Many transgender people do not have access to transition-related care such as hormone therapy. While the ACA currently prohibits health insurers from excluding coverage for transition-related care, Healthcare.gov reports that many health plans still contain exclusions for "services related to sex change" or "sex reassignment surgery." Those without health insurance lack the means to pay for such services.
- New to the region, many in our community do not know that they are eligible for healthcare. Many others are employed in temporary or short terms positions that do not provide healthcare. The lack of culturally relevant services make is more difficult for Pacific Islanders to successfully obtain and utilize health insurance.
- We see how prevailing prejudice against transgender people has resulted in limited job opportunities, leading many to sex work and subsequent incarceration, which further limits opportunities for employment. As a result, our community members face a high risk of violence and abuse, as well as increased risks of HIV and other health concerns, including depression and anxiety.
- Transgender women have traditionally experienced tremendous discrimination in healthcare, education, and the workplace. And while we are seeing encouraging improvements in resources and legal protections, many transgender women carry trauma from negative experiences with healthcare providers and employers.

UTOPIA works to address these disparities by:

- Providing resources to assist QTPI to navigate the healthcare system, ie. accessing health insurance and finding queer and trans-friendly healthcare providers.
- Improving access to basic healthcare services (including preventative healthcare).
- Connecting people with hormone treatments and options and resources for gender-affirming surgery.
- Partnering with the Pierce County AIDS Foundation and Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest and Hawaiian Islands to connect QTPI with condoms, contraception, and regular HIV/STI testing.
- Understanding the necessity of, destigmatizing, and decriminalizing sex work, while at the same time working to make other paths to economic stability available for our community.

- Working to improve access to resources and legal protections against discrimination for QTPI brothers and sisters in healthcare and employment policy and practice.
- Building bridges between healthcare providers, employers, faith community leaders, and policymakers and the QTPI community to find shared understanding and humanity.

4. What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.



UTOPIA values Cultural Heritage

“Ko taku reo taku ohooho, ko taku reo taku mapihi mauria” | “My language is my awakening, my language is the window to my soul.” – Maori

This is a proverb closely associated with language revitalization, a struggle which is very important in maintaining culture. We embrace cultural heritage as a part of our identities. We also hope to preserve the languages and traditions from our ancestors that make us indigenous people of the Pacific.

The soul of our work is our connection with our community, the relationships we build and the cultural experience we share. UTOPIA provides safety and sanctuary for community members who have experienced hate, harassment, abuse, rejection within our own PI community and even from our families of origin. Cultural alignment is a core principle of our work. UTOPIA exists because of the fundamental necessity of the QTPI to create our own loving, accepting family and community. We truly need each other to survive. And this community truly is a family. We take each other in a moment’s notice, no questions asked. We are so far away from our homeland, and this community is all we have here. Together we share community, our cultural and healing practices, our language, and our ways of being in the world.

5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes, so please don’t hold back!



UTOPIA values Diligence

“O le ala i le pule o le Tautua” | “The path to leadership is through good service.” – Samoa

As this Samoan proverb speaks to the importance of diligence in order to achieve leadership, we at UTOPIA also value careful, consistent and intentional work. UTOPIA believes in working diligently to achieve the best outcomes for the QTPI community.

Because we come from the community we serve, UTOPIA has never lacked for community engagement or support. Our largest set of challenges has revolved around lack of organizational capacity and funding to do the work needed. We have a huge network of dedicated volunteers and indeed have been doing the work with little to no funding for many years. This lack of resources has really stretched our capacity to the breaking point. As we get more funding and grow as an organization, we are taking care to develop an organizational structure that will support the long-term sustainability of the work, the staff, and our volunteer community. We need more support to develop our internal structure, administrative systems, and infrastructure.

We've also struggled over time, especially as we begin to seek and receive more funding, to focus our work around the issues that are most critical to QTPI in the region. We're constantly evaluating and changing our programming to reflect the needs and issues of our community. Over the past several years we've run about 20 different programs, from monthly support groups, to an All Trans Choir, to cultural conversations, and community organizing campaigns. Some programs we ran weren't well attended and we've had to adjust our tactics. A regular film screening wasn't attended because too many of our community have evening jobs.

6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?



UTOPIA values Sustainability

"E mae te tavake ki ona fulu" | "The tavake bird treasures its red feathers." –Tokelau

The Tokelau people treasure their language. It is so precious that it must be nurtured for its survival into the future. At UTOPIA, we value sustainability because it shows resilience and endurance. We not only hope to sustain as an organization but it is also important to us that we are able to sustain traditions and practices that identify us as indigenous and QTPI.

For all the challenges we face, this community is incredibly resilient and dedicated to our collective health and healing. We are constantly inspired by UTOPIA's members and their successes, seeing our sisters moved up into leadership roles in their jobs, sisters getting healthy and thriving in the world. Every individual success lifts up the entire community.

Even in the midst of the difficulty of this political moment, overall we still see an overall trend towards more love, more acceptance, and more opportunity for QTPI. *Fa'afafine* used to have a very negative connotation; together we are reclaiming the identity and making it into something to be celebrated. There is a lot more acceptance of *fa'afafine* as we become more understood and accepted within Samoan culture. Through UTOPIA, we are reclaiming who we are, unapologetically, and claiming our right to whole, healthy lives.