June 25, 2025

TO: Charles Uffelman - Tennessee Equality Project

FROM: Melanie Phillip, Embold Research

RE: LGBTQ + Needs Assessment | In-Depth Interview Results, June 2025

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes insights from ten in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals and parents of queer youth in Montgomery County, Tennessee. The findings illuminate a nuanced portrait of a community striving for visibility, safety, and belonging amid a backdrop of conservative social norms and inadequate structural support. Participants describe a patchwork of support systems: grassroots networks, limited inclusive spaces, and politically engaged communities. Yet challenges such as discrimination, mental health access, youth safety, and lack of queer-affirming services remain pronounced.

At the heart of these interviews are stories of perseverance in the face of marginalization. Participants described both subtle and overt acts of exclusion and prejudice, yet also spoke of the healing power of connection, pride, and shared identity. While many queer individuals continue to experience fear or alienation in public spaces, the determination to carve out safer, affirming environments was consistently evident.

The voices in this report not only underscore urgent unmet needs but also articulate a vision for inclusive, community-driven solutions. Their testimonies offer powerful insight into lived experiences and a guide for the creation of supportive public infrastructure. This report presents key findings and detailed recommendations to guide local government action and community investment.

Methodology

Participants were recruited via an online survey distributed to online social media platforms and local community networks. Eligible participants identified as LGBTQ+ individuals living

in Montgomery County or as parents/guardians of LGBTQ+ youth. Ten individuals participated in one-on-one qualitative interviews guided by a semi-structured moderator guide focused on identity, community, youth experience, economics, and future needs.

Participant demographics:

- **Education**: Majority held college degrees, including Bachelor's and Associate's degrees, but individuals without a degree were also interviewed.
- **Voting & Political Identity**: All participants were registered voters; most identified as Democrats, with strong identification in several cases.
- **LGBTQ+ Identification**: All participants identified as LGBTQ+, with identities spanning lesbian, pansexual, gay, non-binary, transgender, and queer.
- **County Residency**: Most had lived in Montgomery County for over 5 years; many for more than a decade.
- **Perceptions of Community**: Participants generally viewed Clarksville as moderately inclusive but noted declines in county livability and inclusivity in recent years.

The interviews were conducted using a flexible format that allowed participants to express concerns, priorities, and personal stories beyond rigid topic boundaries. This narrative richness provides context to statistical findings and surfaces qualitative depth often missed by survey data. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. All names and identifying details have been anonymized.

Theme 1: Visibility and Safety

Participants consistently acknowledged a slow but steady increase in the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and expressions in Montgomery County. Some reported seeing pride flags displayed at homes and in retail settings, occasional public-facing events, and more individuals openly identifying across gender and sexual identities. However, participants were quick to distinguish visibility from safety, pointing out that for many—especially those who are visibly gender nonconforming or trans—being seen can come with considerable risk.

Several interviewees expressed that the act of "being out" in public remains fraught with tension. One participant recounted, "Personally I just assume that everything is going to treat me bad unless I have been explicitly told otherwise. And that's what keeps me safe." Even what might be considered a benign experience, like wearing rainbow iconography, was described in terms of restraint and relief rather than freedom. A participant described their

experience as mixed, experiencing common stares frequently but only outright hostility once: "going out of my way to present as openly queer… even if I'm just like wearing a rainbow jumper jumpsuit outside, um, in the 10 years that I've lived here on this street specifically, I've only gotten "fslured" one time out walking my dog"

Others shared the deep emotional and social labor of navigating daily life while masking aspects of their identity. For non-binary and trans participants in particular, the choice between authenticity and safety felt ever-present. "Even among a lot of queer and trans people, not a lot of them have unpacked that it's okay to look gay and be trans in public," noted one participant, describing a community dynamic where internalized norms could be as limiting as external pressures.

The landscape of safety is further complicated by geography. Some described specific neighborhoods or businesses where they felt more comfortable, while others said they avoided public expression entirely outside of their homes. In this environment, visibility remains both a tool for solidarity and a potential source of threat. Key markers of inclusivity become an indicator of safety: "We have a couple [businesses] that will have like you know those cheesy stickers. 'Everyone is welcome here,' which… it's great to know that people will treat me good and I would appreciate seeing more of that."

Theme 2: Youth Vulnerability and Family Rejection

Across interviews, participants consistently noted that there is little for young people to do in Montgomery County—regardless of their identity. As one participant observed: "Ever since I moved here, I have heard people, students from Austin P and when I moved to teaching at high school, younger demographics even have continued to say there is nothing for kids to do that doesn't cost them money here."

This lack of free, accessible youth programming creates a general climate of disconnection, which is only compounded for LGBTQ+ youth, who often experience exclusion from family, school, or community spaces. Participants described queer youth in Montgomery County as facing intense isolation, limited access to affirming support, and frequent experiences of rejection—particularly within their families and school communities. Several interviewees emphasized the dual harm of external hostility and the absence of protective structures, noting that many young people lacked both physical safe spaces and emotionally safe

relationships. And of particular note was that schools, which were once a place for youth to find reprieve from unsupportive families, are now becoming another place kids have to mask or moderate their identity.

One participant recounted an experience with parental attitudes: "I have had parents say to me... that they would rather have a dead kid than a queer kid. In that joking way that they think this is funny, like it's not a problem."

Another participant described the breakdown of an early effort to build trans youth support: "There was that trans organization that we had going for a little bit... it no longer meets."

Even within LGBTQ+ spaces, internal tensions and exclusionary dynamics can stifle progress. For trans youth especially, the lack of consistent and affirming community support leads to vulnerability. The participant's reflection underscores that efforts to create space are not only under-resourced, but can also be actively undermined by divisions within the broader queer community itself.

Such incidents exemplify the fragility of queer youth support systems in the county, where even modest attempts to organize may falter under community backlash or internal discord. In this climate, many young people must navigate their identity journeys in secrecy or within environments that are indifferent or openly hostile to their existence.

Mental health was a recurring theme in this context. Participants spoke of how the absence of culturally competent therapists, combined with family and peer rejection can lead to depression and anxiety. Several parents and youth recounted children asking if they would be forced to move due to hostile legislation.

The need for consistent, confidential, and queer-affirming spaces for youth—both physical and emotional—was clear across interviews. Participants called for dedicated programs in schools, community centers, and libraries; partnerships with affirming mental health providers; and visible support from trusted adults. Inclusive, youth-centered initiatives—whether explicitly LGBTQ+ or not—are essential for building safety, connection, and belonging.

Theme 3: Community Fragmentation and Resilience

Interviewees consistently emphasized the fragmented nature of the queer community in Montgomery County. Unlike more urban centers where LGBTQ+ populations may have centralized resources or meeting places, participants noted that here, support is informal, dispersed, and often based on personal relationships or private networks. A sentiment echoed across the interviews is summarized in: "It really is a lot of it word of mouth. ... You really have to be in the know to even like expect that to be a thing you could find. ... My boyfriend happened to know one of the coordinators who was at the local college that they attended, and I—I wouldn't know how to find any of that otherwise."

This scattering of support makes it difficult for newcomers or isolated individuals to find community, and contributes to an overall sense of invisibility. The challenge is not the absence of queer people, but rather the absence of durable, publicly accessible infrastructure to support them. This is further compounded by the fact that key components of the community, the local college and military base, creates a community that by definition is constantly "passing through."

Several participants noted that the limited information that is available about queer events or resources often circulates on Facebook—further narrowing access. Those not active on the platform, or who cannot safely engage with queer content online, may be left entirely disconnected. As one participant explained: "Most of the places that I would look for events normally are Facebook, which is kind of boomer to say, but it's the place where you go to see the local events." While Facebook may serve as an informal hub for some, its reliance excludes youth, those without reliable internet, and individuals who fear being outed through their online activity.

Despite these limitations, many participants spoke proudly of the grassroots efforts that do exist. These include social gatherings organized through word-of-mouth, ad hoc mutual aid, and efforts to create affirming spaces at local events or in homes. This comes from an interviewee describing informal community-building efforts: "We do this event every month called make a gay bar where we just go to a straight bar and there's like 20 gay people there. We take up the space. We all hang out and have fun."

In this environment, resilience has become both a strength and a necessity. Participants demonstrated deep commitment to caring for one another, but they also voiced a clear desire for structural support to reduce overreliance on a small number of exhausted community members.

Yet even within these community spaces, barriers remain—especially for those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Several participants pointed out that race, disability, and gender identity can shape how safe or welcome someone feels, even within LGBTQ+ settings. One participant explained: "even if you're openly okay with gay people, you might not be okay with black people or vice versa. [...] you think like, oh man, this person does a lot of work for women's shelters or anti-racism. And then you go in there and they're like, ew, you transgender, get out of my business."

This underscores the importance of not only creating more queer spaces but ensuring that those spaces are meaningfully inclusive—centered on intersectionality and rooted in solidarity across differences.

The repeated call was not just for "more spaces," but for sustainable infrastructure—something that outlasts any one organizer or informal group. Participants called for stable, physical spaces, paid organizing positions, and city-level recognition of LGBTQ+ organizing needs. They want to see the existing, organically grown community efforts respected and expanded, rather than replaced: "There aren't really many like specifically queer spaces. There are some spaces and events that even though they aren't queer, they tend to draw in more queer folks. ... But specifically for queer—like, say, this thing is a very like either queer-owned space or, like a space that's dedicated to queer people outside of things that are political—I haven't really been able to find a lot."

Theme 4: Infrastructure and Accessibility Gaps

Across interviews, participants emphasized that even the limited spaces that do exist for queer gathering and organizing in Montgomery County are often inaccessible to many members of the community. Accessibility barriers—physical, sensory, financial, and

digital—routinely prevent full participation. These challenges are especially acute for people with disabilities, those with sensory sensitivities, and community members with limited financial means or transportation options.

One participant described the physical inaccessibility of many public events: "A lot of our events are held outside and sometimes they're marches and that is pretty inaccessible for a lot of the people who need to be there and feel like they should be a part there."

Cost also emerged as a persistent barrier to participation—particularly for youth and low-income community members. As one educator noted: "Ever since I moved here, I have heard people… say there is nothing for kids to do that doesn't cost them money here." Across interviews people echoed the sentiment that participation in LBGTQ+ events almost always comes with a price tag that many in the area just cannot afford.

Even when events are accessible in principle, the means of learning about them can be limiting. Many rely on social media or private word-of-mouth networks. For individuals without those connections—or those who are newly arriving or isolated—access to community becomes much harder. As one participant explained: "If you're not in the know, it's hard to get in the know unless you are a part of a group or something that's like actively doing it."

There's a need for centralized, inclusive communication and design practices that don't assume access to specific platforms, mobility, or neurotypical experiences. Ultimately, interviewees called for a shift in how queer space is conceived and built. Inclusive design must become foundational—not an afterthought—in creating spaces where LGBTQ+ people can gather, heal, and organize.

Theme 5: Political Representation and Public Advocacy

Participants painted a stark picture of the political landscape in Montgomery County as it relates to LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. A majority expressed feelings of abandonment, disillusionment, and even fear stemming from local and state leadership. Interviewees consistently stated that political representation for LGBTQ+ people is not just lacking—it is, in many cases, actively harmful.

One noted that "we have a council member who ... likes to use public taxpayer time to talk about how, um, the Skittles are pedophiling your children by turning them gay and that we should start a militia against Clarksville gay people"

Several participants emphasized that, beyond overt hostility, the silence of local elected officials was itself harmful. As one person described, "most of the time what we get if anything is just a shake of the head and they look down and they don't say much." This absence of visible support was experienced as a failure of leadership, especially in the face of open discrimination. They followed up with a clear desire for more vocal advocacy: "I want them to show that they actually support us. I want them to stand up and say, 'This is unacceptable behavior. You can't say this about members of your community'"

A recurring concern was the passage and enforcement of discriminatory laws and policies, particularly those targeting trans individuals and LGBTQ+ youth. Interviewees cited legislative actions such as anti-drag bills, restrictions on gender-affirming care, and school policies that censor inclusive education or restrict pronoun use. These policies were described as both dehumanizing and dangerous. For trans participants, the implications were existential: access to medical care, public facilities, and safe educational environments felt increasingly uncertain.

Participants also described the toll of political hostility on mental health. One person noted: "just all of these different things that they're um putting into law. even if they're not necessarily going into law, going into action, they are making people feel so unsafe at every single turn and knowing that they are not welcome and knowing that people don't want them there and people want them eradicated and it's very very scary." The emotional burden of political exclusion extended into daily life, influencing everything from employment to housing choices.

Despite this challenging landscape, interviewees expressed a strong desire for civic engagement. They called for leaders who would not only protect queer rights through policy, but also affirm their dignity through symbolic gestures—attending pride events, speaking out against hate crimes, and appointing LGBTQ+ individuals to public boards or committees.

In sum, the demand for political representation was not just about visibility but about power: the power to shape decisions, allocate resources, and transform public discourse in ways that reflect and protect the full humanity of LGBTQ+ people in Montgomery County.

Theme 6: Vision for a Queer-Affirming Community Center

Perhaps the most unified and actionable vision to emerge from the interviews was the desire for a dedicated, fully accessible, 24-hour LGBTQ+ community center in Montgomery County. Participants from across identity groups, backgrounds, and roles articulated the need for a centralized, safe, and affirming space—designed not just to host events but to serve as an infrastructural anchor for the queer community.

This proposed community center was envisioned as more than just a building. It would be a living, breathing resource hub, offering a continuum of support and belonging. When asked what they would invest in, one participant said they would prioritize: "building a uh protected outreach center specifically for queer communities. One of the issues that we have among the homeless queer community here is that so many of the um so many of the places are church-based [...] like the Salvation Army will turn away trans people [...] so that would be my immediate—I would build some kind of public space, some publicly protected space." This insight underscores the need for alternative institutions that reflect queer values and safety needs, particularly for youth, unhoused individuals, and those escaping abusive environments.

Participants imagined the center hosting a wide array of programming: mental health counseling from queer-competent providers, legal aid for name changes or housing disputes, HIV/STI testing, job-readiness workshops, parenting support groups, gender-affirming wardrobe closets, book clubs, and creative arts spaces. Crucially, the center would be open late or 24 hours, responding to the reality that crises—and moments of isolation—rarely follow a 9-to-5 schedule.

Accessibility was central to this vision. Participants emphasized that the building must be physically accessible to people with mobility challenges, offer sensory-friendly zones for neurodivergent attendees, and operate on a sliding scale or free-cost model to ensure economic inclusion. Many also stressed the need for multilingual signage and

communication, with clear accommodations for deaf and hard-of-hearing community members.

The envisioned space was also deeply intergenerational. Interviewees hoped to see youth programming alongside elder support, mentorship between queer adults and LGBTQ+ teens, and room for quiet reflection as well as joyful celebration. "[A] clinic, but it also had like a community center like on the side or like there was like like you could like do activities or you could come in and volunteer and do different things"

Beyond programming, the center would serve a symbolic function: a visible statement that LGBTQ+ people belong in Montgomery County—not just privately or online, but in the public landscape. Participants believed this visibility could transform both internal community confidence and external perceptions, helping shift local culture toward broader acceptance.

Ultimately, this community center was not just a wish list. It was a blueprint—a vision borne of both struggle and imagination, rooted in collective care.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered through interviews and supported by participant testimony, we propose the following recommendations for Montgomery County stakeholders, including local government, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and community leaders. These recommendations are designed to address the barriers identified, support existing strengths, and cultivate long-term structural support for the queer community.

1. Establish a Fully Accessible LGBTQ+ Community Center

Montgomery County should prioritize the creation of a 24-hour LGBTQ+ community center. This center should serve as a central hub for services including crisis response, peer support, youth and elder programming, affirming healthcare referrals, mental health counseling, legal and housing advocacy, and arts and cultural activities. The facility should be ADA-compliant and designed with sensory-accessible features. It should include multilingual signage, private meeting rooms, all-gender restrooms, and indoor and outdoor spaces for both quiet and group engagement. Importantly, the center should be governed in part by LGBTQ+ residents themselves, to ensure it reflects the community's needs.

While establishing a fully resourced, 24-hour LGBTQ+ community center is a critical long-term goal, cost and political will might limit immediate implementation. As interim steps, stakeholders could invest in lower-budget alternatives such as securing regular access to public libraries, community rooms, or faith-based spaces that are affirming. Partnerships with existing nonprofits could support pop-up clinics, peer support meetups, and mobile outreach for rural residents. Additionally, funding for a dedicated community coordinator role—someone tasked with organizing events, managing referrals, and building coalitions—was suggested as a meaningful way to begin building infrastructure without the upfront cost of a full facility.

2. Improve Accessibility Across All Queer Spaces and Events

Organizers of queer events—whether grassroots or institutional—must adopt inclusive practices from the planning stage. This includes securing physically accessible venues, providing low-sensory spaces and noise accommodations, offering sliding-scale or free admission options, and ensuring events are promoted through accessible, screen-reader-friendly digital materials. Local governments can assist by creating grants or incentives for groups who meet inclusive design standards.

3. Protect and Affirm LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools and Beyond

Public schools must become safer and more affirming for LGBTQ+ students. This includes restoring and funding Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), adopting inclusive curricula, providing confidential mental health services, and training educators in trauma-informed and identity-affirming pedagogy. Montgomery County Schools should partner with local queer youth to co-design programming and ensure feedback loops are in place. In parallel, community spaces should offer age-specific programming and parent support resources.

While realizing the above may take a long-term strategy and strategic timing, immediate action could come by focusing on just youth, not identity specific planning. Many participants emphasized that even youth programming not explicitly labeled as LGBTQ+ can serve a vital role when designed with inclusivity and safety in mind. Activities like art clubs, game nights, skill-building workshops, and volunteer opportunities—when hosted in welcoming spaces and facilitated by affirming adults—can offer critical refuge for queer and questioning youth who may lack support at home or in school. Critical to this is that these events are free and accessible. By focusing on creating environments where all identities are

respected and affirmed, community partners can meet youth where they are and build trust without requiring disclosure or labeling. This could allow for some ground to be gained despite the current political environment.

4. Advance LGBTQ+ Political Representation and Advocacy

Local elected officials and civic leaders should make public commitments to LGBTQ+ equity through statements, inclusive hiring, and participation in pride events. The county can support LGBTQ+ advisory councils to guide local policy, and ensure queer voices are represented in all relevant decision-making processes. Policies that attempt to limit LGBTQ+ rights—such as anti-drag laws or pronoun restrictions—should be opposed clearly and consistently.

In addition to holding leaders accountable, participants also stressed the need to support and strengthen allyship. Many community members—teachers, parents, business owners, and faith leaders—want to be supportive but lack clear guidance or confidence. Local governments, nonprofits, and advocacy groups can help by offering allyship trainings, public toolkits, and opportunities for visible solidarity. Celebrating and resourcing allies who speak up—especially in conservative settings—can build momentum, reduce stigma, and foster a broader culture of inclusion.

5. Support Inclusive Cultural Events That Reflect and Celebrate Queer Presence

Visibility matters, but it doesn't always have to be exclusive to queer-specific spaces. Local arts councils, tourism offices, and cultural organizations should ensure that queer creators, performers, and vendors are actively included in broader community events—such as arts festivals, farmers markets, and seasonal celebrations like Halloween or "spooky" nights. Participants described these spaces as vital opportunities for connection, self-expression, and joy. Further, these events often had a higher probability of attracting a more inclusive crowd. A regular calendar of inclusive cultural programming—featuring and compensating queer artists—can help reinforce belonging while inviting the broader community into shared spaces of creativity and celebration.

6. Support Queer-Owned and Inclusive Local Businesses

Many local businesses may want to signal safety and support for LGBTQ+ customers and staff, but may hesitate due to fear of backlash or unclear guidance. Montgomery County can

make inclusion easier by offering low-cost tools such as "LGBTQ+ Inclusive" window stickers, social media assets, or inclusion registries that help supportive businesses reach values-aligned consumers. Even simpler steps—like reposting local Pride events on social media or featuring a small rainbow decal—can communicate welcome without major investment. Economic development initiatives—like startup grants, marketing support, or procurement preferences for queer-owned or inclusive businesses—can further incentivize visibility while strengthening the local economy.

7. Ensure Mental and Physical Health Support Is Accessible in Inclusive Community Spaces

Rather than building entirely new systems, Montgomery County should work to ensure that existing community spaces—such as churches, nonprofits, and outreach centers—are welcoming and safe for all marginalized people, including LGBTQ+ residents. This includes training staff in trauma-informed, identity-affirming practices and partnering with regional LGBTQ+ mental health organizations to provide guidance and resources. Collaborating with faith-based groups and service providers can help expand access while ensuring no one is turned away due to their identity. Special attention should be given to crisis prevention for youth, people experiencing homelessness, and those facing family rejection or domestic violence.

This approach is about meeting people where they are while working toward a more inclusive future. In the short term, it's critical to ensure that existing community institutions—many of which already provide vital services—are not perpetuating exclusion or harm. By fostering partnerships and encouraging inclusive practices, Montgomery County can create safer, more accessible spaces within the systems that already exist. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the long-term goal: building community resources that are explicitly LGBTQ+ centered and designed from the ground up with queer lives and experiences in mind.

8. Prioritize Intersectional Outreach and Research

Future needs assessments, including the quantitative study to follow, should explicitly center the voices of LGBTQ+ people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, older adults, lower-income, and others facing layered marginalization. Partnering with culturally

specific organizations and offering interpretation services will ensure more inclusive engagement and representation.

By acting on these recommendations, Montgomery County can build a safer, more vibrant, and more inclusive future—one where all queer people, across identities and generations, feel affirmed, visible, and at home.