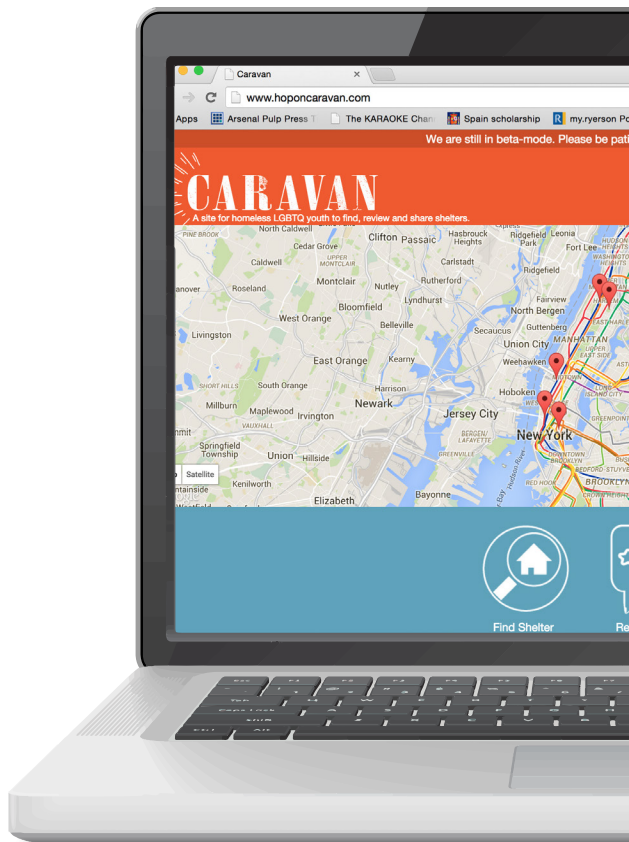


# SHELTER INFORMATION DESIGN

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Caravan is a digital platform for homeless LGBTQ youth to find, share and review shelters. It aims to amplify the collective LGBTQ voice within homeless shelters, while also lending social service providers insight into potential areas of improvement.

ROBIN NEWMAN



**“The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”**

- Chimamanda Adichie: The danger of a single story



Photos From Interviews at The New York Presbyterian Hospital with Project Stay, 2015.

**WHILE HOMELESSNESS IS DEVASTATING FOR ALL YOUTH, IT IS ESPECIALLY SO FOR THE 40% WHO IDENTIFY AS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER OR QUESTIONING (LGBTQ).**

# ABOUT THIS PROJECT

I can't tell the story about my thesis process, without mentioning Say No More.

Say No More ([www.sayno-moregame.com](http://www.sayno-moregame.com)) is an educational card game that helps young girls. It aims to prevent domestic sex trafficking and was developed in our games for impact class with my classmates, Meghan Lazier, and Michelle Kwon. It was the foundation of my initial research which informed everything I have done, and where I am now. Say No More is a tool that allows pre-teen girls to reflect on uncomfortable situations, healthy relationship boundaries, and practice saying no. For social workers, it allows them to get a pulse on girls risk factors and gently introduce girls to the issue of trafficking.

In my research I spoke with human rights lawyers, sex trafficked survivors, pre-teen girls, advocates, faith-based organizations, to tech-driven data scientists all with the same aim: to empower with knowledge and prevent human sex trafficking. The game has been funded by a Sappi Ideas That Matter Grant for nearly \$20,000 and will live on beyond the classroom.

But consistently I was asked this question; what about young boys or LGBTQ youth? From my research with Say No More, girls were the central focus of most services and the main victim of the story. The main insights I gained were that girls rarely ever self-identify as being a victim, and social services

lack creative prevention tools to better engage girls to come forward with their stories. If this was difficult for girls, what I quickly learned is the numbers were not accurately conveying how difficult it may be for boys or LGBTQ youth. What I quickly learned is the numbers were not accurately conveying the right message and I risked distorting the truth.

In an interview with Tina Frundt, founder of Courtney's House and a survivor herself she told me "90% of the girls identify as LGBTQ, just nobody asks. If you're not having the conversations, nobody discloses." Boys and LGBTQ youth are affected too, yet the numbers still live in the shadows, simply because not enough people are asking.

My thesis began with aiming to tell the rest of the story. Say No More may not tackle the whole story, yet I risked telling a single story. I was inspired to go further.

Research says that LGBTQ youth are disproportionately affected by hate crimes, abuse and even homelessness, leaving them wide open to become victim of violation. They need a safe space outside of their own families homes, where people accept them for who they are-yet too often lack they are left out of the conversation and few services are designed with LGBTQ people in mind.

My next step was figuring out how to better include the lived experience of homeless LGBTQ youth (ages 18-24) in New York City in the process of accessing safe shelter information. This action of improving information, can act as preventative care for youth who may otherwise resort to selling their bodies, doing or selling drugs, just to find a place to stay for the night. After interviewing over twenty experts ranging from shelter staff, social workers, human rights lawyers, Queer activists, sex trafficking specialists, HIV/AIDS health workers and LGBTQ youth in New York City shelters, I gathered information in hopes to enhance the current gap and accessibility to poorly designed shelter information and indirectly reduce the likelihood of being placed in vulnerable situations, like sex survival.

What originally started as a desire to create a project that would help open up data to inform youth on how many shelter beds were available each night, transformed into a peer-generated review system with the aim to help youth to share what really goes on inside shelters. The aim of reviews is to keep shelters more accountable and help LGBTQ youth better understand their choices.

**"90% of the girls identify as LGBTQ, just nobody asks. If you're not having the conversations, nobody discloses."**

- Tina Frundt, Founder and Survivor.  
Courtneys House

# THE PROBLEM

An estimated 2.8 million homeless youth ages 18 to 24 live in the USA, with New York City leading as the second largest homeless youth capital next to L.A. While homelessness is devastating for all youth, it's especially so for the 40% who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or questioning (LGBTQ), which is disproportionate to the percentage of LGBTQ youth in the general youth population (only 4-10%). This number is likely low and depends on the LGBTQ feelings of safety and trust to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity, which research suggests not everyone in this population is ready or willing to do so. While it is hard to get an exact number of homeless LGBTQ youth, it is certain that this group is at higher risk of further hate crimes, violence, abuse and sexual victimization on the streets.

## CRITICAL TERMS

**Sexual orientation:** Whom a person is physically and emotionally attracted to. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity; transgender people may identify as heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or any other sexual orientation. (Human Rights Campaign)

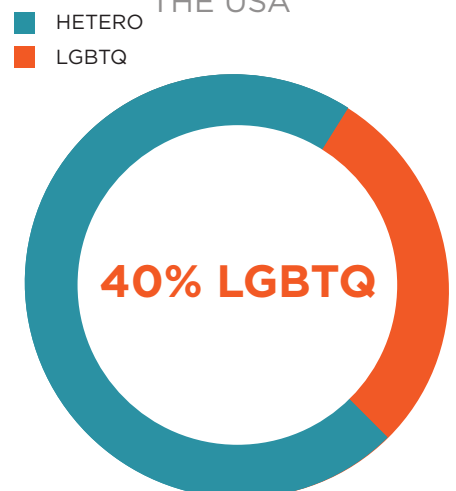
**LGBTQ:** An acronym used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer person. (The Urban Institute)

**Transgender:** People whose gender identity (internal sense of being female, male, or another gender) is incongruent with their sex assigned at birth (physical body). Transgender is also used as an umbrella term to refer to communities of people that include all whose gender identity or gender expression do not match society's expectations of how they should behave in relation to their gender (e.g., transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and other people whose gender expressions from traditional gender norms) (Perry and Green 2014).

**Youth Survival sex:** Youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods (e.g., shelter, food, and drugs) are used here to reflect young people's experiences of involvement in the commercial sex market in their own terms. These terms describe a behavior as opposed to labeling the youth themselves. (The Urban Institute)

**Sex Trafficking:** "The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act where such an act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age, or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery." (Shared Hope)

TOTAL HOMELESS YOUTH  
(18-24) POPULATION IN  
THE USA





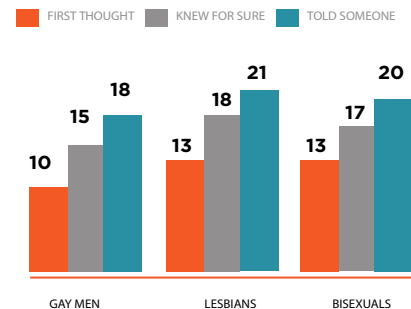
# UNDERSTANDING: Why are LGBTQ youth disproportionately affected by homelessness?

Youth are coming out at earlier ages, now more than ever. Research shows youth are coming out as early as 13 years old, and while this experience is accepted by some families, for others, they are forced out of their homes due to severe family conflict. Youth that end up on the street typically have faced some form of family violence, neglect or physical and mental abuse as the initial trigger for running away, and LGBTQ youth face these kinds of violations more frequently. They are twice as likely to experience these violations as a reason for running away and when on the streets.

In a country where 13 states still ban same-sex marriages<sup>1</sup>, social progress is still in question. Even though most LGBTQ adults say there has been significant progress toward social acceptance, relatively few (19%) say there is a lot of social acceptance for the LGBTQ population today.<sup>2</sup> In America, and even in New York City, acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ people, treatment towards the LGBTQ homeless population and community overall is slow to change and deeply rooted in religious, personal and cultural beliefs. For this reason, it is understandable that due to the real safety concerns and threats, those who are LGBTQ may only disclose on a need to know basis, runaway to find those who support each other and seek out communities and spaces that best support their preferences and needs.

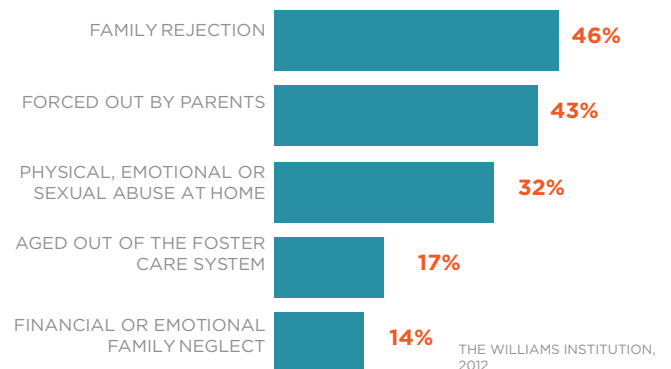
## The Coming Out Experience; When You Thought, Knew, Told

Median age at which gay men/lesbians/bisexuals say they were or might be LGB



PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2013

## Top Five Reasons LGBTQ Youth Are, Or Are At Risk Of Being Homeless



**“The number one reason that LGBTQ homeless youth are homeless, is for coming out to their family, facing rejection and conflict.”**

- Williams Institute Law”

1 “The 13 states that still ban same sex marriages.” CNN 2015

2 “A Survey of LGBT Americans Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times” PEW Report, 2013

**ONE IN FOUR YOUTH HAS  
BEEN A VICTIM OF SEX  
TRAFFICKING OR HAD  
ENGAGED IN SURVIVAL SEX,  
AND 48% OF THOSE WHO  
ENGAGED IN A COMMERCIAL  
SEX ACTIVITY DID SO  
BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T HAVE  
A PLACE TO STAY.**

**THE URBAN INSTITUTE**

# RISK FACTORS

## Major Guiding Questions:

1. How can we create better communications for LGBTQ youth to find and access safe places to stay?
2. How can we convey meaningful and inclusive LGBTQ youth information for shelter services?
3. How do LGBTQ youth find and share information from the lived experience of being homeless?
4. Can LGBTQ youth trust each other to gather and share information?
5. How can we better enhance the transparency and accountability of shelters for LGBTQ youth?
6. What are the needs, constraints, and sensitivities that influence homeless LGBTQ youth behaviors?
7. What opportunities are there to improve access to shelter information for LGBTQ youth?
8. How can technology be leveraged to best support the LGBTQ youth homeless community in NYC?

## Target Audience

The target audience for my thesis project is homeless LGBTQ youth ages of 18-24, because they are a critical stage in their own development and begin to feel confident sharing their identity, and being rejected by their families. Sadly, The number one reason why youth leave the home or end up on the streets is because their own families reject them. What I learned from experts is that 18-24 is the prime age where many youth also leave the foster care agencies, often unsupported and end up on the streets. They rely on the people, places and systems around them to provide positive encouragement and support. Without an environment of acceptance, many youth risk social rejection and homelessness.

## Risk Factors for Runaway and Homeless LGBTQ Youth

While there are many factors that contribute to a person running away from home, abuse and violence are the most common. When a young person has chosen to runaway from home, homelessness can act as a trigger to other vulnerabilities including survival through sex, prostitution, further increased risk of HIV/AIDS and predation from sex traffickers. For all homeless youth, there is a higher rate of depression, suicide attempts, mental health disorders and chronic physical health conditions and high rates of substance abuse disorders. The sad truth is without the right resources and support, youth become vulnerable to further violations and sexual victimization on the streets too. An estimate of one in four youth had been a victim of sex trafficking or had engaged in survival sex, and that 48% of those who engaged in a commercial sex activity did so because they didn't have a safe place to stay.<sup>1</sup> Some predators use other tactics such as luring their victims like promising a better life, showering their victims gifts, compliments, and sexual and physical intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> "Surviving the Streets of New York Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YSWW Engaged in Survival Sex." The Urban Institute, 2015



# THE NEED: FINDING SAFE SPACE

When homeless youth who do not have their basic needs met; food, housing, a job or companionship, they will frequently compromise their bodies and mental health to be provided with these needs. Homeless shelters across the country can only hold a fraction of the rapidly increasing homeless population, and even still youth do not know what to expect, how to find and trust the right people or programs and navigating the system is difficult. The services that do exist, and that they do access, too often have limited resources and are poorly designed.



**How can we create better communications for LGBTQ youth to find and access safe places to stay?**

## MEET GEORGE.

Most people would never think it just by looking at him, but George had been in and out of homelessness for five years. Originally from North Carolina, George left when he was 17 years old after some disagreements with his mom and family.

While in New York City George spent hours weekly, sometimes daily just looking for a safe place to stay. He faced many difficulties finding a place to stay. In an interview at the New York Presbyterian Hospital, he told me he would be having to deal with “whatever the person required of you, whether that be using drugs, having sex, whatever it means to be warm that night. Just in exchange for a bed, or a floor. There was a lot of compromising that [he] had to do in order to ensure he had a place [...]”

To George, a safe space is ‘a place of solitude where you can be alone with your thoughts and be at peace, [...] as long as you have a sense of inner peace within yourself that’s a safe space. Any public places, libraries, [he] used a lot [...] nice quiet room. Just a place to read, use the internet, better yourself, and you meet some interesting people in the library too. Coffee shops. anywhere where could be secluded in the back, be amongst people but not be amongst them.’

Finding a safe and friendly LGBTQ environment was key to George’s transition off the streets. The LGBTQ shelter he found ‘was a great place where everybody understood where he was coming from, some have had their own struggles and tribulations and periods of homelessness, and views on sexual orientation.’ This gave him the confidence to go further- Like many LGBTQ youth- finding safe spaces, free of judgment is critical to getting positive community support to transition off the streets.



# THE OPPORTUNITY: Youth Internet Access and Shelter Information Design

## Good information is imperative to navigating complex systems.

It may be surprising, but in a world that has become so digitized, even homeless youth are connected now more than ever. One study suggests that 85% of homeless youth get online at least once a week, and that they access a wide spectrum of network ties, such as family, friends, case workers, employers in shelters, as well as using the internet to search for relevant information. One in four teens use their cell phones to access the internet, or otherwise have access to devices such as a library computer. These cell phones and computers are key access points that give youth the information and social support they need.

**“85% of homeless youth get online at least once a week”**

- J Urban Health, 2011.

The problem is the non-profit world and government agencies are slow to adopt new technologies and there is an existing gap between new technologies and reaching youth. Shelter services seriously lack well designed digital services. From poorly navigable resources to maps or hard to read websites, the designs that do exist are often dry and boring. They do not engage youth in a meaningful way and youth often spend hours or days looking for information. Often critical information is hidden in hard-to-navigate bureaucracy or websites.

For the homeless LGBTQ youth population who already lack necessary services, even with access to the internet they are at a significant disadvantage. While some attempts have been made to enhance services and programming across America for LGBTQ youth, there is still major lack of funding, support and services for those who are. From my research I discovered that shelter information and technology, just simply can't keep up with the trends which it could use to leverage helping youth better access information and services.

### Gap in LGBTQ service design: Lack of sex and gender appropriateness

While there are many great efforts and people working on this issue, there is still so much more that can be done to include LGBTQ youth into programming and shelter services. And we can start by asking the right questions, collecting the right data and creating platforms for youth to provide feedback. In collecting data that informs public policy and services designed in shelters, most often, only one question is asked: What is your sex? or What is your gender?, and only two or four options are provided requesting only one choice: Male or Female, or Male, Female, Male-to-Female (MTF), or Female-to-Male (FTM). This is far too simplistic and ineffectively collect critical information. While some shelter staff are trained on LGBTQ populations needs, there is no culturally appropriate or standardized training and some youth prefer to speak about their personal issues with those they trust, or those they know identify similarly to them, or at least show openness to the subject. More could be done to provide great designs that are easy to use and understand, not just what shelter staff want youth to have, but look for what LGBTQ youth really need.

<sup>1</sup> “Cell Phone Use among Homeless Youth: Potential for New Health Interventions and Research” J Urban Health. Eric Rice, corresponding author Alex Lee, and Sean Taitt, 2011

# LGBTQ YOUTH COMMUNICATIONS: Internet Access and Poor Shelter Information Design



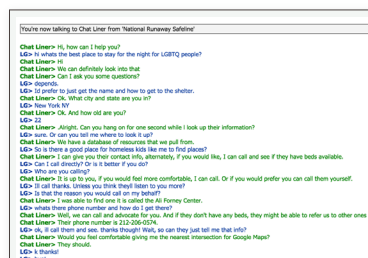
I spoke with over 20 experts to gain insights on the Homeless LGBTQ youth issue here in the USA as well as the internationally, soaking up as much knowledge as I could on the issue of technology, homelessness and LGBTQ rights.

## POOR VISUAL AND SYSTEMS DESIGN:

I asked experts to send me the resource guides they most use or knew, the worst of which looked like this:



This was a design one nurse from the Covenant House sent me as an 'excellent resource'. An example of a terrible app designed to help youth find various services, mostly through clicking, only to eventually find



In one chat with the National Runaway Hotline I had to disclose my race and sexual orientation. The conversation, lasted a total of fifteen minutes just to get two phone numbers. Before I had a chance to write down the numbers, the chat-line person signed out first- which automatically signed me out- leaving me no time to write them down.



## ICTs and LGBTQ Rights: What are the Challenges and Possibilities?



April 21st New York City Salon - [RSVP Now](#)

Some of the African countries that receive the largest amounts of foreign aid are those with the [worst records on gay rights](#). Many of these same countries also serve as important hubs for the ICT4D ecosystem. Homosexuality is punishable by up to 14 years of imprisonment in the Christian-majority South of Nigeria and death by stoning in the Muslim North. It is also illegal in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, all of whom receive large amounts of foreign aid funding.

One of my favorite research moments was attending the New York Tech Salon on ICT's for LGBTQ Rights. There were diverse voices around the table - We examined specific concerns that ICT4D practitioners who identify as LGBTQ have, as well as how LGBTQ stakeholders are (or are not) incorporated into ICT4D projects, programs and policies. Among the many issues covered in the Salon, the role of the Internet and mobile devices for both community building and surveillance/security concerns played a central part in much of the discussion.

## KEY INSIGHTS & FINDINGS

1. Existing shelter information and both visual and system design lacks clarity.
2. There is little personal touch in current shelter technologies and shelter technologies are outdated.
3. Too many questions are asked for youth who are already lacking trust.
4. Information is hidden and hard to find both under bureaucracy and poorly designed resources
5. Few to none services are designed specifically to the LGBTQ youth experience.



# RESEARCH & METHODS

## Research Approach and Methodologies

The research and design for this study was conducted by myself, with help from a developer Gustavo Saume. The overall research encompassed human centered design, data collection, one-to-one interviews, and final presentation. Together, we created an online platform for homeless LGBTQ youth to find, share and review shelter.

The process was not as linear as this paper makes it seem. Access to users, especially those at risk can be hard. Yet, the key principle guiding this work is how to design with users, not for them. Relying heavily on a qualitative, human-centered, and solutions-oriented approach is one I feel strongly determines the success of this project. This process emphasizes the importance of building face to face relationships, observation deep listening that helps me to understand human behaviour, free of judgment but rather that can enhance the experience of the user based on their existing needs and patterns.

I sought out LGBTQ youth (ages 18-24) as end-users who we could gain feedback on our designs and helped us to measure the overall project success throughout its development and change it as needed overtime. In working with LGBTQ homeless youth and shelter information design, you hear a lot of stories. Some stories are hard to hear. It is especially important to release judgement and include our final 'users', the youth themselves in the design process to really meet them where they are in life. It requires true empathy and deep listening to respond. I feel fortunate to have worked with ten youth from the New York Presbyterian Hospital under the guidance of Joanna Pudil, LCSW, Senior Social Worker at Project STAY.

### Major Guiding Questions:

1. How might we better map safe shelters for LGBTQ youth to find safe places, faster?
2. What are the current challenges preventing youth to accessing safe shelter?
3. Can shelter staff act as a catalyst to open up bed data for LGBTQ youth to find and locate a safe place to stay? How might we open bed data for youth to access?
4. What ways do youth most connect and access information now? Where do they go?
5. What services do shelter staff currently have in place that we can leverage and build on?

# PROTOTYPE 1: BEDALERT

## About BedAlert

To begin prototyping, I asked myself, what is the fastest, most efficient way to connect LGBTQ youth with a place to stay? Knowing the almost half will be subjected to commercial sexual activities just for a place to stay, I wanted to connect LGBTQ youth to already existing bed information. I came up with this idea called BedAlert, a mobile technology to alert youth when a bed became available at a nearby shelter.

## One to one interviews: Subject Matter Specialists

I spoke with over twenty experts ranging from social workers, shelter staff, homeless and runaway youth advocates, case workers, human rights lawyers, sex survivors, sex trafficking specialists, senior researchers on LGBTQ issues in the USA, Queer activists, HIV/AIDS health workers. The aim was to gauge their interest on the idea and to test its viability.

## Initial Excitements

After presenting the idea of real-time bed alerts to twenty experts, 18 out of 20 experts wanted to see this system implemented. In order to test this idea rapidly and as low-cost as possible, I asked each one who worked in a Shelter to email me when a bed became free. I wanted to see if the city, starting with shelter staff, would participate in opening up bed data for youth to know when a shelter bed became available utilizing social media. Knowing that close to half of the homeless youth population has a smartphone, and go online once a week (especially to Facebook and Twitter), the idea was to leverage technology to reach this audience. To test if BedAlert would work, I asked shelter staff to simply email me for one week before noon and let me know how many beds, if at all, became available. I would then curate and share the information on a central twitter and facebook page using targeted advertisements towards our audience.

## Quotes from Key Experts

“Can I vote for [this idea] an infinite amount of times?! :) I think we talked about the need for accessible and transparent shelter information for youth last time we met. That would be awesome to have!”

- Senior Researcher on LGBTQ rights and Sex Survival

“I am drawn to [this] app because knowing all the shelters in an area, what their criteria is (age, gender, dry or wet, and the others you mentioned) and if there are beds is hard info to get without making a million calls. So this app sounds also amazing for a service providers as well.”

- Nurse at the Covenant House

“That’s the immediate need [ ...] The filters and the real-time notification are great ideas.”

- Youth Coordinator at Safe Harbour

-

# PROTOTYPE 1: BEDALERT

## Challenges Opening Bed Data

Although there was an incredible amount of initial enthusiasm for the project, and an overwhelming majority voted 18 out of 20 experts voted for it, the project faced major participation challenges. When asked to partake, zero did.

After speaking with experts, it was evident the barriers they perceived. Here are some key quotes to help illustrate their thinkings and the challenges that prevented participation:

### 1. City Data is hard to Access

I was unable to open the data for research given my limitation in time. The biggest lesson I learned from this experience was city data is very hard to access, and only limited to few.

#### Quotes from key interviewees

“This won’t work for the city funded shelter system bc of the centralized intake process they have.”

“It is very difficult for youth to access shelter and as many homeless youth don’t have consistent access to a phone [...] so maybe a webpage would be a better option?”

### 2. Shelters Lack Good Technology

#### Quotes from key interviewees

“Also I am assuming a lot of the shelters do not have sophisticated enough technology to support it. It would require a lot of rearrangement of their infrastructure. Not saying it’s a bad idea, but I am not familiar with that space.”

“The real-time notifications might be hard to implement fully on the agency end since unfortunately there are still a lot out there who aren’t so much with the technology...”

#### Key Insights and Findings:

1. Shelter staff have little perceived extra time for additional tasks, even when tacked onto similar work
2. Access to data is only limited to few and is highly institutionalized
3. Political allyship from one shelter to the next makes it even harder to share



# PROTOTYPE 1: BEDALERT

## 3. A Bed Is Not Enough

### Quotes from key interviewees

“If the services aren’t good, or you don’t feel like you can disclose anything, it is just a bed”

- Tina Frundt, Courneys House

Furthermore, from experience through email communications or one on one interviews, it was clear that:

## 4. Shelter staff had perceived, or very limited extra time:

It is unfair to ask busy shelter staff to add one additional task to their day. Although all participants were excited initially about BedAlert, they may not have expected further partnership or requests. This was not their number one priority, given there was no funding and they have strict limitations on the hours and energy put outside of work efforts.

## 5. Political Allyship

Even when some shelters had a bed available, which was not often, they only chose to select individuals or specific shelters to share the information with.

While I was unable to open the data for research and the biggest lesson I learned from this experience was not to seek permission to design only from professional experts. I also had to be very realistic with my own timeline, access and limitations. It led me to ask the question if I can’t get experts to share information quickly, can youth trust other youth to share information for their own development?

Which led me to my final prototype, designing Caravan.

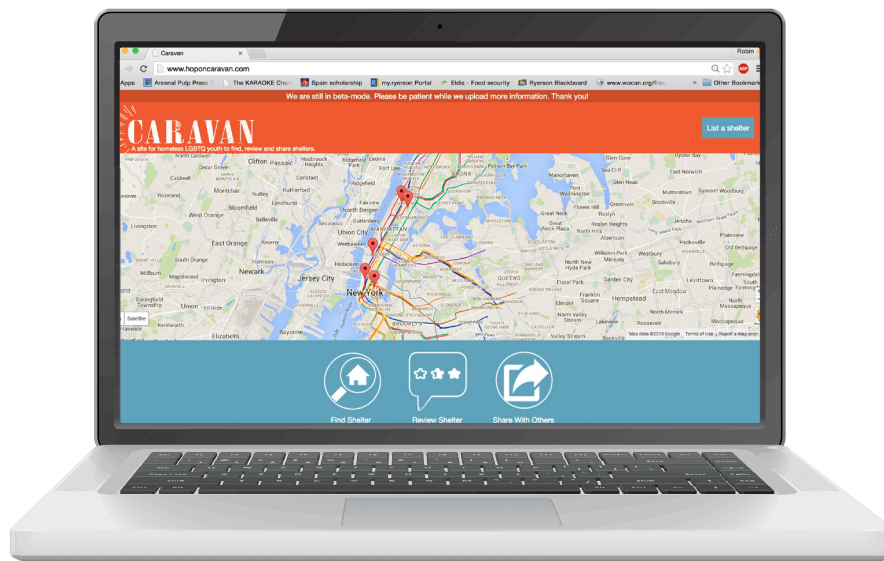
**“If the services aren’t good, or you don’t feel like  
you can disclose anything, it is just a bed”**

- Tina Frundt

**COULD YOUTH  
TRUST OTHER  
YOUTH TO SHARE  
INFORMATION?**

# PROTOTYPE 2: CARAVAN

# CARAVAN



**Caravan is a website for homeless LGBTQ youth ages 16-24 to find, review and share information on shelters, anonymously.**

# PROTOTYPE 2: CARAVAN

## About Caravan

Caravan is a website for LGBTQ homeless youth to find, share and review shelters, anonymously.

In collaboration with a developer, we conducted ten one-to-one interviews with Project Stay LGBTQ youth participants who had experienced, or were currently experiencing homelessness. The aim of these interviews was to youth to better design an accessible, easy to use resource guide that list LGBTQ friendly shelters in New York City. Although an information system and resource guide won't solve the issue, it has the potential to support individual agency and encourage social progress. It can also serve as a feedback mechanism for shelters who are trying to help people, but may not know their own biases or limiting policies.

I explored the information needs and behaviors of these youth who came from diverse communities across the USA, but convened in NYC where they experienced full or partial homelessness ranging from three months to five years. After thirty minute one to one interviews with each youth, we captured their stories and integrated what we heard. Than I returned a second time to see what they thought, how they used it and what could be improved.

### Major Guiding Questions:

1. Which shelter services did you first use when you entered into homelessness? List all that you know.
2. How did you first hear about those services? How do you find your information now?
3. Which of these services need to be most improved? Have you ever experienced poor quality or unethical health services?
4. What happens when something inside a shelter is bad, who do you tell?



Gustavo Saume, Developer (left) and Robin Newman (right)

## KEY INSIGHTS & FINDINGS

**1. LGBTQ youth have powerful networks, and surrogate families**



A DENSE NETWORK OF SUPPORT

**2. Youth share information through informal communication, mostly word of mouth**



POWERFUL SURROGATE FAMILIES

**3. Youth agree that a safe space is important, even online.**



INFORMAL WAYS TO SHARE ADVICE

**4. Youth trust each other to share information, as well as the shelter staff they have personal relationships with.**

# PROTOTYPE 2: CARAVAN

## Thinking Beyond the rainbow

For decades, the rainbow flag has become a symbol of the LGBTQ movement. And while some LGBTQ persons identify with this symbol, there are others who do not and wish for new symbols to emerge or to better blend in with society, far beyond the rainbow. The rainbow is meant to be an expression of diversity, acceptance, and hope. It is meant to show that all people come in all different 'colours'. And while many LGBTQ persons are completely comfortable with sharing their identity widely, and connect to this rainbow symbolism, there are others who are careful about who and how they share, feel the symbol is overused or doesn't adequately represent them as equal parts in society.

I myself struggled with avoiding the rainbow. Yet, I believe when designing services, products or programs for people, we need to be aware of perpetuating stereotypes through use of imagery. Or else we not only risk alienating our users, but undermining the purpose of what we are trying to do- in this case giving LGBTQ youth the same civil liberties as all other groups- access to information and services that are free from discrimination. I believe there is a lot more 'everyday' imagery that needs to be shown, and can better normalize these experiences.

I tried to strike a balance of needs- whether or not you connect to the rainbow. In the end, I purposefully designing a platform that is bright, easy to access, and has a fresh modern feel with subtle abstract rainbow icons (upper right). These icons are generated for each time youth leave a shelter ratings. I did not abandon the symbol completely as a way to reach a compromises. The hope is to create a subtle and abstract enough symbol, that is not overwhelming as to turn someone off. The main colours for the Caravan platform are Orange, Tiel and light Purple for all visitors to the site (whether they do or do not identify as LGBTQ to feel welcome; and still use the service and gain the same benefits without feeling like it is not for them.



One youth from Project Stay said:

“ I'm not as big of a fan of the rainbow flag. I don't mind being associated with the it, but I want to be like everybody else, I want to fit in. I am just like everybody else.”



**“YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU  
ARE GOING TO GET AT ANY  
OF THESE PLACES.”**

- LGBTQ Homeless Youth from Project Stay



# PROTOTYPE 2: CARAVAN

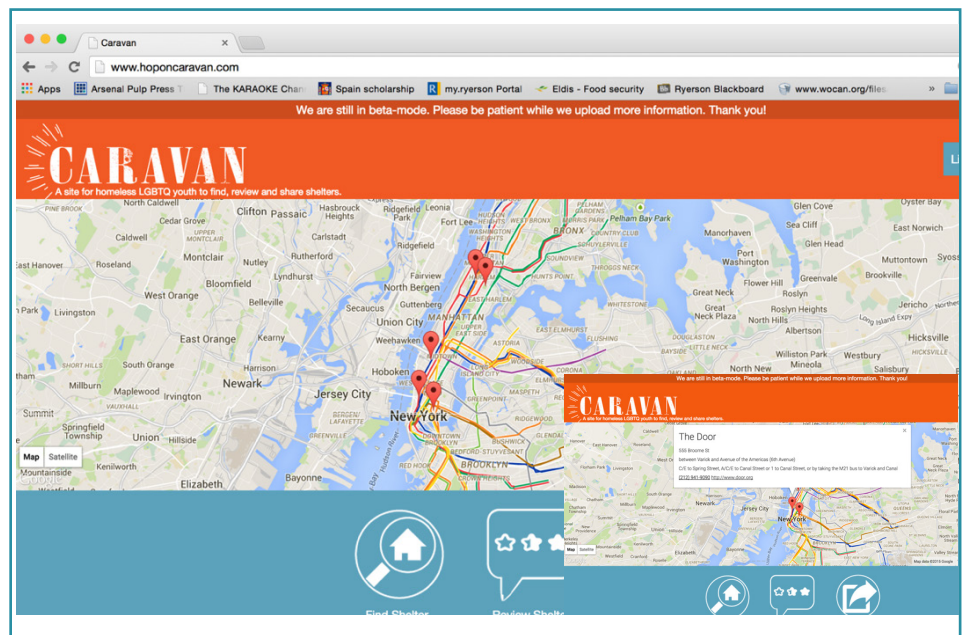
Caravan is a digital platform for homeless LGBTQ youth to find, share and review shelters. It aims to amplify the collective LGBTQ voice within homeless shelters, while also lending social service providers insight into potential areas of improvement.

For the moment when they've left the house for the first time, or if they've been in and out of homelessness and you need to connect to others who care, Caravan helps to show where all the best shelters are, and allows you to see what real youth experience is like in them.

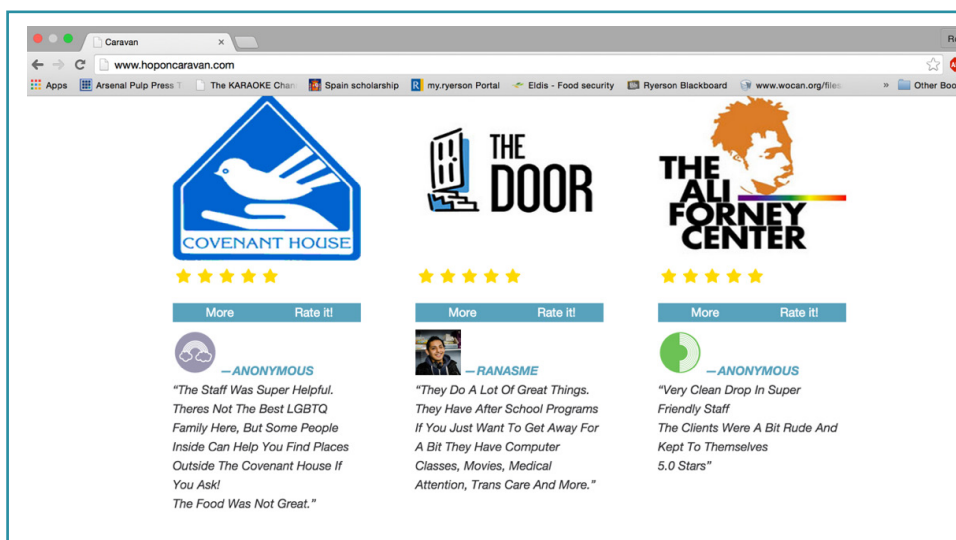
Here's how it works:

## FIND SHELTER FIRST: LOCATING THE MAP

1. The very first thing youth see is the map of their city. Youth can find where to go first, and sort shelters by location. The front page makes it clear what the purpose is and helps youth to get to where they need to go first.



2. **SORT SHELTERS BY NAME OR LOCATION**  
Youth can scroll below the map to find a list of all the shelters by their familiar logos, names and by rating.



# PROTOTYPE 2: CARAVAN

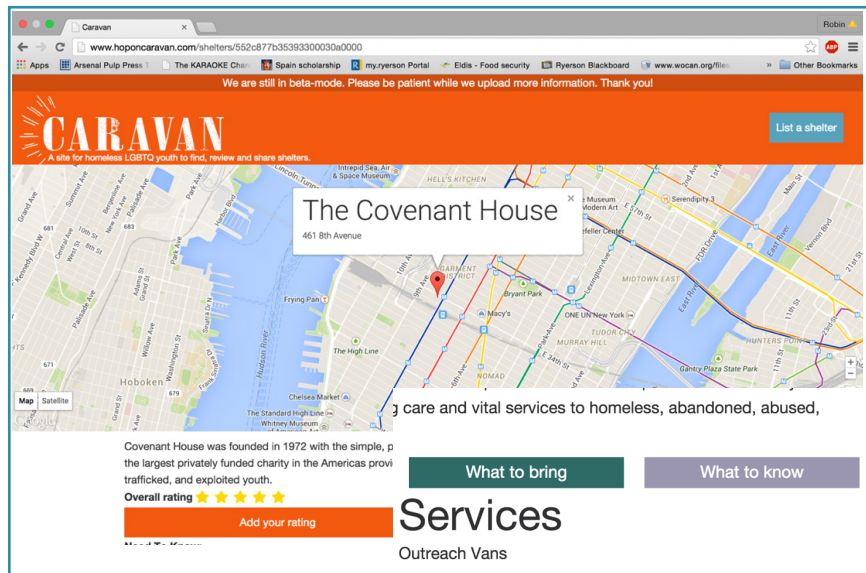
3.

## WHAT DO I NEED TO BRING AND KNOW TO A SHELTER?

A lot of youth did not know what to bring when they first went to a shelter. Many LGBTQ homeless youth were surprised by things like having a curfew or following rules they didn't want to abide by.

To see more information on each shelter, simply click for 'more' to view the detailed shelter page.

Here Caravan helps answer the questions most youth don't know to ask until they've lived it, such as what age does this shelter accommodate? Do I need to bring ID or referral for housing? What time is

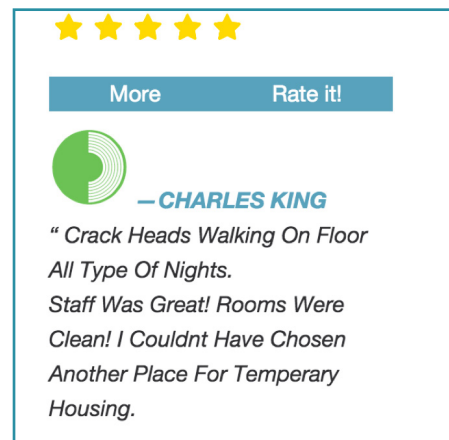


4.

## RATING SYSTEM: ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

When one youth told me “You never know what you're going to get when you end up at any of these places”, Gustavo and I answered by creating a rating system- because if we can rate our restaurants, why shouldn't we rate our shelters? Youth are encouraged to share their experiences after each visit, anonymously. In a guided pop up form, they can say what they want, however they want.

Shelters that provide LGBTQ services, or other good services, are rewarded with positive comments. This can be used to help not only youth, but also social service providers to look at potential areas of improvement.



# IMPACT, SUCCESS AND FUTURE

When George, one of the youth who has engaged in survival sex for a place to stay saw the most current version he said:

**“Had I known what I know now, about these programs that actually help you get off the streets faster, I think I would have taken back some of the decisions I made compromising my own morals and beliefs...”**

## SUCCESS:

To me, George’s feedback is an example of what true success looks like.

As I mentioned earlier, access to users, especially those at risk is hard-yet access is not enough. It has to work and be validated. It must be tailored to the users needs. I feel successful having had gained this access but more than that, having gained validation from nine out of ten LGBTQ homeless youth who said this was a resource they would want to use.

The success of the project is evident through the following:

- Without any advertising, Caravan was launched in April 2015 and gained the 166 users in the first month, and 81 Facebook likes. Though most came on the site looking for shelters, others left a rating.
- This comment from staff at the Ali Forney Center, one of the largest agencies in New York City dedicated to homeless LGBTQ youth who wrote me to say:



Hi Robin. This is an amazing resource tool.. For Ali Forney Center, is there a way to add that we are an Overnight Drop-In Program also where up to LGBTQ Youth 16-24 have the ability to stay on-site overnight?

- Project Stay, who provides comprehensive health services for high-risk and HIV-positive adolescents and young adults between the ages of 13 and 24 in New York City and helped us to gain interviews with ten LGBTQ homeless youth, has mentioned a strong interest to seek funding so we can continue the project.

## FUTURE:

### POTENTIAL TO SCALE

- With funding, Caravan has the potential to reach not only the 100,000 homeless LGBTQ youth in the USA, but can also act as a platform to be designed for the total 2.8 million homeless youth who also need better designed platforms tailored to their needs. This could first be done by simply adding filters and tailoring features on the website to specified population needs; i.e mother and child.

### SERVICE IMPROVEMENT

- When youth use Caravan and review shelters, shelters that provide LGBTQ services, or other good services, are rewarded with positive comments. This can be used to help not only youth, but also social service providers to look at potential areas of improvement and policy changes.

### MODEL FOR OTHERS

- Caravan is more than just a resource guide- it can act as source of inspiration for other organizations and designers to think about all other minority groups + populations who are far too often left out of the conversation. From designing websites, to designing our very cities, everyone deserves to be included in beautiful design that can bring dignity & clarity to their lives- and can be included in the process.



# RESOURCES

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# Acknowledgements

The Ali Forney Center

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Neha Gautaum- Queer Film Activist

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ment manager

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Ten LGBTQ Youth Participants at The New York Presbyterian Hospital- Project Stay

David Gajer who reminds me to look at privilege and power in everyday moments.  
All my DSI professors and my incredibly supportive cohort. (We did it!)

My parents who trusted in my wild ideas.

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shared their stories with us in The New York Presbyterian Hospital at  
Project Stay. George, Rasame, Joseph, Brittany, Jay, Harold, Jade,  
Eric, Alexis, and Charles.

It's these stories we tell with hope to inspire others  
to create social change.

We are live and in Beta-Mode.  
Follow us at:

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 **CARAVAN**