

# Grace Cottage recognized as major LGBTQ+ ally

- By Chris Mays, Brattleboro Reformer
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Grace Cottage celebrates Pride Month in 2020.

TOWNSHEND — After earning a top ranking for LGBTQ+ health care service last year, Grace Cottage Family Health and Hospital's Health Equity Team is continuing to seek progress.

"It's woven into our DNA in Grace Cottage to provide compassionate care, and we do that," said Andrea Seaton, senior director of development, marketing and community relations at Grace Cottage, pointing to high patient satisfaction scores. "It's been really a pleasure and a privilege to work with the Equity Team because we're doing such good work in making sure that employees receive the necessary training that they need and that we keep this effort going forward."

Dr. George Terwilliger, chief medical officer at Grace Cottage, said support for the effort from staff has been overwhelming. His hope is to receive an even better ranking from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation this year after recently submitting a new survey.

Grace Cottage received a "LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Top Performer" designation from HRC last year, obtaining a score of 95 out of 100 in the foundation's Healthcare Equality Index. A record 906 healthcare facilities participated in the 2022 survey last year, and 251 earned "Top Performer" designation, according to a news release.

Only two Vermont hospitals, Grace Cottage and the Veterans Administration Medical Center in White River Junction, earned "Top Performer" status. They scored 95 out of 100 on criteria such as foundational policies and training in LGBTQ+ patient-centered care, LGBTQ+ patient services and support, employee benefits and policies, and patient and community engagement.

About four years ago, Scott Coffey Heller and his husband Dave King had approached Grace Cottage about serving the LGBTQ+ community. The couple has been together for 32 years.

King, who grew up in Newfane, met Heller when he was competing in a triathlon at Mount Snow, where King ran the mountain bike program. Heller had a share of a gay ski house in Jamaica and it was his first time visiting during the summer.

Initially, the couple had a long distance relationship. Heller said he eventually "threw in the towel" and moved here to make Frog Meadow Farm in Newfane a sanctuary for the couple and their friends. About 17 years ago, they turned it into a bed and breakfast for gay men.

A number of guests at Frog Meadow have fallen in love with the area, Heller said. He described Frog Meadow as a business serving an "underserved niche."

Local activities and attractions are a match for gay men's sensibilities, Heller said.

"They want to be here," he said.

He recounted guests staying at Frog Meadow who had never before seen rainbow flags flying outside of churches. Seeing local support and advocacy for the LGBTQ community, guests have now bought second homes or moved here or intend to retire here.

"We've become this gay men's welcome wagon, for no better way of saying this," he said. "The thing that's so refreshing for so many guys is they think rural is backward, conservative and Trump county, and we've gone to heaven here."

When former guests buy property locally, Heller and King get asked for recommendations. They advise on people to hire for plumbing and electrical work.

When the question came up with respect to health care, they decided to approach Grace Cottage. Heller said they essentially told hospital officials that "if you build it, they will come."

COVID-19 caused some delays in furthering the conversation. However, hospital officials created the Health Equity Team then reached back out to the couple to see if they'd like to participate and represent the public.

"From the employee perspective, what a great place you can work at," Heller said. "You can be your authentic self. You have gay, straight, bi allies within the organization."

Receiving a 95/100 ranking from HRC is "an extraordinary thing," Heller said. He described HRC as "the nation's largest umbrella lobbying and educational organization for the LGBTQ community," which ranks the top 100 employers and also the best in health care. He noted Grace

Cottage is the smallest acute care facility that isn't affiliated with any other organization or hospital in the state and country.

Terwilliger said hospital policies allow employees to have their partners on health care plans whether or not they're married. Coverage also includes gender transitions.

LGBTQ+ focused care includes confidential referrals for gender-affirming surgeries, confidential referrals to endocrinology, contraception, counseling and psychiatric services, hormone therapy, LGBTQ+ focused alcohol and substance use treatment, HIV treatment, and routine sex-transmitted infection testing and counseling, according to [gracecottage.org/our-services/primary-care/lgbtq-affirming-care](https://gracecottage.org/our-services/primary-care/lgbtq-affirming-care).

Grace Cottage employees celebrate Pride Month every June with several events to raise awareness.

"That's been very well received," Seaton said.

Terwilliger started at Grace Cottage in July 2019. A year or two before, Nurse Practitioner Summer Birch was working at the hospital as a medical student and helped rewrite a policy to incorporate better awareness of LGBTQ+ issues.

Having a family member in the LGBTQ+ community, Terwilliger had wanted to establish a committee before being approached by Heller and King.

"It all dovetailed pretty easily," Terwilliger said, describing the meeting with the couple as serendipitous. "It was on my mind."

Grace Cottage always had "an accepting an affirming community just because we're kind people," Terwilliger said. By going through the HRC process, he added, the hospital institutionalized its policies and procedures.

Through the process, Grace Cottage also identified its deficiencies. For instance, improvements have been made in using the medical record system to get the correct pronouns and gender preferences of patients.

Instead of creating an LGBTQ+ committee, the hospital created the Health Equity Team. Terwilliger said the idea is to include people who have been historically marginalized.

Grace Cottage recently revamped its interpretative services to better serve its patients.

"It was kind of clunky," Terwilliger said. "We identified that as an issue. We purchased tablets to make that easier for nurses to make that happen. That includes American Sign Language."

Terwilliger said the Health Equity Team feels it's "done a pretty good job with the LGBTQ community but we need to focus more on racial issues."

"Vermont is maybe the second whitest state in the nation, if not the first," he said. "Certainly, we're one of the whitest counties in the state so we're sensitive to that. There's potential for some built-in racial issues because of that discrepancy."

The Health Equity Team, which worked with the Pride Center and Out in the Open on LGBTQ+ issues, also is collaborating with the Windham County NAACP.

About 18 months ago, the Health Equity Team spearheaded an initiative to share the untold story about how Valley Cares Senior Living got started. Heller said Warren Kronemeyer and Leon

Ingall, a gay couple who met while serving in World War II together, retired to Townshend and opened up an antique store and became beloved citizens of the area.

"Eventually, as they got older, they set about to donate their land to Grace Cottage to help them create an elder care facility," Heller said.

One of the now-deceased couple's cousins has a traveling road show that tells their story. Heller said the presentation was made to a limited audience at Grace Cottage during the pandemic and filmed to be shared more widely.

The video can be found at [frogmeadow.com/event/warle-a-celebration-and-remembrance-of-warren-kronemeyer-leon-ingall](https://frogmeadow.com/event/warle-a-celebration-and-remembrance-of-warren-kronemeyer-leon-ingall). Plaques to celebrate the founding of Valley Cares are now at both facilities.

"I know Warren and Leon would have been very, very pleased with what happened here and the gratitude we have for helping Grace Cottage, for helping Valley Cares, and for everything [their cousin] has done to raise awareness," Seaton said.

Terwilliger acknowledged the HRC ranking is "a moving target."

"We'll never have arrived and be done," he said. However, the plan is to keep the Health Equity Team going forever.

Seaton said the effort is part of Grace Cottage's operations plan, which is fully endorsed by its Board of Trustees.