



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN  
FOUNDATION

# Healthcare Equality Index 2026

Promoting Equitable and Inclusive Care  
for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and  
Queer Patients and Their Families



# Executive Summary

THE HEALTHCARE EQUALITY INDEX 2026 arrives at a pivotal moment. LGBTQ+ patients, families, healthcare workers, and institutions face a healthcare landscape shaped by intensified political attacks, shifting legal requirements, and uncertainty around access to inclusive, medically necessary care. At the same time, healthcare professionals and administrators are being asked to uphold their commitments to quality, safety, dignity, and patient-centered care in an increasingly challenging environment.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation recognizes the real pressures on healthcare facilities today. State laws, federal actions, anti-DEI efforts, and attacks on gender-affirming care have shaped a climate in which some institutions rethink how they communicate about LGBTQ+ inclusion, support staff, and maintain patient services. Still, the need for LGBTQ+ inclusive care has not diminished—it is even more urgent.

LGBTQ+ people face significant health disparities due to stigma, discrimination, unequal access to resources, and fear of mistreatment in healthcare. These barriers

often cause patients to delay or avoid care, with serious consequences. Inclusive policies and practices are central to quality care. Explicit nondiscrimination policies, trained staff, accurate patient information, inclusive services, equitable employee benefits, and meaningful community engagement build patient trust.

For nearly two decades, the Healthcare Equality Index has been the national benchmark and roadmap for healthcare facilities working to strengthen LGBTQ+ patient-centered care. The HEI evaluates participating facilities across core areas of practice, including nondiscrimination

and staff training; patient services and support; employee benefits and policies; and patient and community engagement. These criteria reflect one essential principle: LGBTQ+ patients, visitors, and staff deserve dignity, respect, and fairness in every healthcare setting.

In the HEI 2026 survey cycle, participation persisted despite rapidly evolving legal and political challenges. Across the United States, 741 healthcare facilities completed the HEI survey to assess their LGBTQ+ inclusive policies. Of these, 323 facilities (44%) received the LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leader designation, while 343

## By the Numbers

### HEI 2026 Participants at a Glance

## 741 Participants

- 261 Teaching Hospitals
- 35 Federally Qualified Health Centers (or Look-Alikes)
- 34 Pediatric Hospitals
- 32 Critical Access Hospitals

- **323 Leaders / 44%**
- **343 High Performers / 46%**



facilities (46%) earned High Performer status. In total, 666 facilities—nearly 90% of all those surveyed—achieved one of the top designations. Notably, the 2026 cohort included 49 new participants, and 53 facilities improved their designation from prior years. These results indicate that many healthcare institutions are maintaining and even expanding LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts, despite increasingly complex circumstances.

This year’s report reflects that healthcare facilities nationwide are operating under significant and changing constraints. Due to ongoing threats at the federal level, state restrictions, and political volatility, HEI 2026 participants could opt not to display their individual scorecards in the HRC Foundation’s online search directory. Instead, this report presents aggregate findings: these high-level statistics enable national benchmarking, trend identification, and practical guidance while accounting for the complex environment in which many facilities deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive care.

Gender-affirming care is under threat across the country, with state bans, federal

actions, investigations, and administrative decisions, creating uncertainty for healthcare providers and profound harm for transgender and non-binary patients. All facilities listed in the online search directory will include a Gender-Affirming Care Alert that links readers to a webpage with additional information and resources.

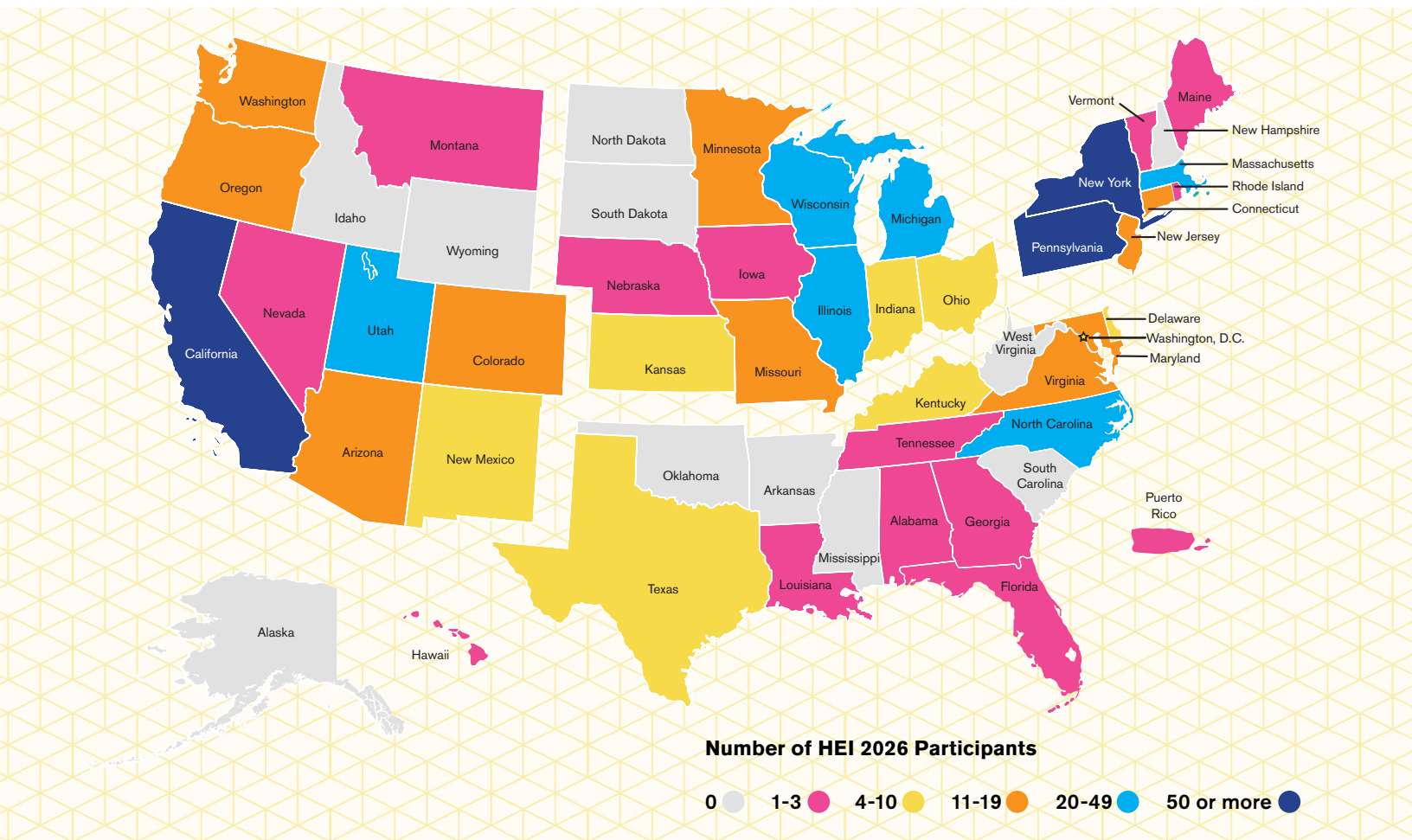
Even where legal constraints affect the availability of specific services, healthcare facilities remain responsible for ensuring that transgender and non-binary patients are treated with dignity, respect, and transparency. The HRC Foundation continues to call on all healthcare facilities to support transgender and non-binary patients to the fullest extent possible, including through nondiscrimination protections, respectful communication, accurate information, staff training, continuity of care, and appropriate referrals where available.

The HRC Foundation commends facilities using the HEI for reflection, accountability, and improvement. Participation is a public demonstration that LGBTQ+ patients and staff matter. Recognition is not the end. As LGBTQ+ people face debates about

their care, families, and lives, healthcare institutions must not only provide clarity, compassion, and evidence-based care but also take decisive action to champion inclusive practices, actively support LGBTQ+ communities, and ensure safe, affirming environments for all.

The HEI 2026 helps healthcare facilities maintain and strengthen LGBTQ+ inclusive care under extraordinary pressure. The report offers aggregate findings, benchmarks, and guidance for adaptation. The standard remains: every patient deserves safe, respectful, inclusive, dignified care.

HEI 2026 results show that healthcare facilities are advancing LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices despite significant external pressure. For healthcare leaders, the message is clear: LGBTQ+ inclusion is essential for safe, high-quality, trustworthy care. The HRC Foundation applauds participating facilities for their commitment and challenges all healthcare institutions to take immediate action by using the HEI as a roadmap to strengthen care for LGBTQ+ patients, families, staff, and communities.



# Why the HEI Matters Now

LGBTQ+ people need healthcare they can trust. This need has always guided the Healthcare Equality Index, but in 2026, it is especially urgent. Across the country, LGBTQ+ patients, families, healthcare workers, and healthcare institutions are navigating intensified political attacks, changing legal requirements, and growing uncertainty about access to inclusive, medically necessary care.

These pressures are especially severe for transgender and non-binary people, whose access to gender-affirming care has been restricted by state laws, federal actions, investigations, and administrative decisions. But the impact extends beyond any single service or patient population. When LGBTQ+ people see their rights debated, their care limited, or their identities politicized, mistrust in healthcare systems grows — making patients less likely to seek the care they need.

That mistrust is longstanding. LGBTQ+ people continue to face health disparities rooted in stigma, discrimination, unequal access to resources, lack of culturally competent providers, and fear of mistreatment. These barriers can cause patients to delay or avoid care, with serious physical and mental health consequences. For patients who have been denied care, misgendered, excluded from decision-making, or treated disrespectfully, trust must be built through clear policies, trained staff, respectful communication, and consistent practice.

Inclusive care is integral to quality care. A facility's commitment to LGBTQ+ patients is demonstrated not only in public statements, but in how patients are greeted, how their information is collected and protected, whether their families are recognized, whether staff

understand their needs, and whether policies are applied consistently.

Research increasingly supports this connection. A 2025 longitudinal study using HEI and HCAHPS data found that hospitals consistently participating in the HEI received higher patient ratings and recommendation scores than hospitals that never participated. Among HEI-participating hospitals, stronger HEI performance was also associated with higher patient satisfaction.\*

Inclusive policies also matter for the healthcare workforce. A 2025 study examining HEI scores, nurse burnout, and job turnover found that higher HEI scores were associated with lower odds of nurses intending to leave their employer. The study also found that inclusive hospital policies positively affected job retention regardless of nurses' burnout status, underscoring that inclusion can support workforce stability and patient-centered care.\*\*

Together, these findings reinforce a key message for healthcare leaders: LGBTQ+ inclusion is not symbolic or separate from institutional priorities. It is aligned with improving patient experience, building trust, supporting staff, reducing avoidable harm, and creating systems of care that respond to the communities they serve.

For nearly two decades, the HEI has provided a practical, measurable framework for this work. It helps facilities assess their policies and practices, identify gaps, and take concrete steps toward LGBTQ+ patient-centered care. In a difficult climate, the HEI offers an accountable path forward — and upholds a standard that should not depend on politics: every patient deserves safe, respectful, inclusive care grounded in dignity.

## Why Participate?

- ✓ Learn best practices for LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion
- ✓ Provide patient-centered care to a long-overlooked group
- ✓ Enhance patient satisfaction ratings
- ✓ Ensure compliance with legal, CMS and The Joint Commission requirements
- ✓ Improve quality and safety
- ✓ Reduce risk of litigation, complaints and negative publicity
- ✓ Reach out to a highly loyal market segment
- ✓ Enjoy recognition for commitment to equity, inclusion & diversity from the nation's largest LGBTQ+ civil rights organization

## How to Participate

### What Organizations are Eligible?

The HEI is primarily intended for **inpatient facilities** that provide general medical and surgical care. However, specialty hospitals and **certain outpatient healthcare facilities** may request to participate in the HEI. Typically, a facility or organization must have **at least 100 employees to be eligible to participate**.

The outpatient healthcare facilities that are eligible to participate include non-profit community-based clinic organizations such as FQHCs and FQHC look-alikes; public health department clinics; student health centers; LGBTQ+ and HIV specialty clinics; Planned Parenthood Affiliates and other reproductive and/or fertility health clinics; and other nonprofit or governmental organizations that prioritize meeting the healthcare needs of an underserved area or population.

**To register to participate:**  
[hrc.org/Participate-HEI](https://hrc.org/Participate-HEI)

**The survey period for the HEI 2028 will open in 2027.**

**To read the full HEI 2026 report go to:**  
[hrc.org/he](https://hrc.org/he)

**Contact us:** [hei@hrc.org](mailto:hei@hrc.org)

\*Yu H, McHugh MD, Bauermeister JA, et al. Impact of hospitals' LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts on patient satisfaction from 2016 to 2023: a retrospective longitudinal observational study. *BMJ Quality & Safety* 2025;34:718-728.

\*\*Yu H, Bauermeister JA, McHugh MD, Hanneman T, Lasater KB. Inclusive Hospital Policies, Nurse Burnout, and Job Turnover. *Nurs Res*. 2025 Sep-Oct 01;74(5):364-370.