



How to Support LGBT+ Employee Security Abroad

Summary

Every organization has personnel that require different kinds of care and different types of preparation. There are seasoned travelers and newbies, people who come from different religious or ethnic backgrounds, and those with disabilities. Most organizations have already incorporated the needs of these people into their security protocols. But how does planning for the security of LGBT+ personnel abroad differ from plans involving those other groups of travelers? Security protocols should consider how legal obstacles, cultural obstacles, healthcare issues, and bias might affect the security of personnel abroad, whether for short-term travel or long-term stints living abroad and representing an organization.

Legal Concerns

At least 71 countries outlaw homosexual activity, with some countries mandating imprisonment or even capital punishment for those caught breaking the law. But protection of LGBT+ travelers is more complex than merely ensuring your personnel refrain from prohibited sexual activity abroad. More than 100 countries have no protections against discrimination (coming from official or unofficial sources) of LGBT+ individuals. This means that LGBT+ employees must navigate a complicated legal framework when traveling abroad, and face an outsized risk of arrest, arbitrary detainment, or harassment for simply being themselves.

Prior to travel abroad, taking certain actions will help prepare your organization and any LGBT+ representative traveler.

- Analyze all laws that could impact your LGBT+ employees. For example, same-sex marriage laws and laws against cross-dressing impact the LGBT+ community without criminalizing homosexuality outright.
- Check online resources like the State Department's [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#) or crowdsourced information such as [Equaldex](#). Non-governmental organizations also monitor and publish trusted resources such as [Stonewall's Global Workplace Briefings](#) that can help you ascertain the security environment for LGBT+ travelers.
- Understand local law enforcement practices. Some countries may be less likely to prosecute U.S. or other foreign citizens under anti-LGBT laws due to diplomatic concerns, although this may not be a sufficient shield against initial arrest, arbitrary detention, uneven enforcement of LGBT+ protections, or harassment by authorities.
- Develop protocols for how your travelers should respond in case of detainment, as well as how your organization will respond. Make sure there is an LGBT-friendly point of contact (POC) who they know they can contact in an emergency, and contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate as soon as possible. U.S. embassy employees will not judge or discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

- Warn your personnel to be especially wary of entrapment campaigns, where law enforcement officers pose as a potential partner to lure LGBT+ people into outing themselves. Entrapment campaigns typically occur via social media, chat rooms, and dating apps, where law enforcement agents create fake accounts to gather information on LGBT+ people in countries with anti-homosexuality laws.
- Exercise increased caution in airports, where authorities may use anti-prostitution laws against LGBT+ people traveling with items such as gender-affirming prosthetics, which they may classify as “sex paraphernalia.”

Physical Safety

Hate crimes and physical harassment always pose a risk, even in places with tolerant laws or strong legal protections. Ensure you have procedures on how to respond if your employee is the victim of harassment or physical attack.

- Designate a POC before travel so your employee knows who to reach out to for help.
- Contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate, who will work with local law enforcement if appropriate to ensure the safety of your employee.
- Before travel, identify LGBT+ friendly medical facilities to ensure availability of non-stigmatizing emergency care.
- Exercise increased caution while in locations that are well-known identifiers of the LGBT+ population, such as pride parades and gay bars.
- Exercise increased caution when using public restrooms, especially when traveling outside of metropolitan areas.

General best practices for avoiding unwanted attention and violent crime also apply.

- Travel in groups of two or more.
- If possible, avoid traveling alone at night.
- Alert people to your destination and expected return/arrival time if traveling through an unsafe neighborhood or in a location known to be unfriendly to LGBT+ individuals.
- Do not escalate a situation provoked by a stranger. Attempt to leave rather than responding.

Transportation Concerns

Airports are one of the most common points of danger or harassment for LGBT+ travelers. Airport security can be particularly difficult to navigate for transgender and non-binary travelers. Before traveling, ensure that transgender and non-binary travelers are aware of the following best practices.

- All travel documents should have matching gender markers. While mismatched travel documents will likely not prevent a traveler from getting through security in countries with legal protections, they can still provoke extra screening, delays, and potential embarrassment.
- Transgender employees whose gender expression does not match their identification documents should carry additional documentation such as an official doctor's note. Prepare additional documentation of a gender transition if the traveler's gender presentation does not match the sex on their travel documents. Some employees may not have disclosed their transgender status professionally. In these cases, work travel booked by a third party may increase the risk of travel documents that don't match. Publicize the availability of internal and external resources for travelers whose transgender status remains undisclosed at work.
- Double check host-country visa requirements for same-sex spouses. Some countries may not grant spousal visas for same-sex spouses if the employee is being sent on a long-term assignment. There are workarounds, but this is a good thing to be aware of before the spouse experiences detainment or deportation for an invalid visa while traveling.
- Properly document all medications and medical devices, supported by a doctor's note, and cleared with the airline ahead of travel. These can include:
 - Hormone therapies classified as controlled substances, such as testosterone;
 - Medications that require unopened containers to remain temperature-controlled; and
 - Syringes or other items generally prohibited on planes.

At the airport, advise travelers to take additional, proactive precautions to avoid harassment or delays.

- Request a private pat-down procedure instead of a public screening, if desired.
- Alert the personnel conducting your security screening of any gender-affirming prosthetics and binders. These will often appear as suspicious on airport body scanners, as will the appearance of genitals or breasts that do not match the sex that the travel documents alert the scanners to expect. These often can prompt further screening and pat-down procedures.
- Assert your rights politely but forcefully if security personnel are violating them. In the U.S., the TSA must respect the traveler's gender identity and use a same-gender employee to conduct the pat-down, as well as agree to private screenings upon request. The TSA offers [additional guidance](#) for transgender passengers. The National Center for Transgender Equality has published [an online guide](#).

Health Concerns

There are many concerns about access to consistent and non-stigmatizing healthcare that should be part of any emergency response and risk mitigation strategy. LGBT+ patients frequently experience discrimination or insufficient healthcare if their health providers are not qualified to deal with health situations unique to LGBT+ individuals. LGBT+ individuals are more likely to avoid routine healthcare to avoid potentially uncomfortable or judgmental situations. When moving to another country, it is important to support your employee's search for a healthcare provider that makes them comfortable.

- Vet potential healthcare options to ensure your employee will have access to non-stigmatizing care.
- Ensure consistent access to gender-affirming care for transgender employees on long-term assignments.
- Prioritize emergency services that have the capacity to respond to the specific concerns of transgender individuals. Triage medical care can often be particularly stigmatizing – this may be unavoidable in an emergency, but supporting your LGBT+ employees to access local resources can help address the physical and emotional needs of LGBT+ people in the aftermath of an emergency.
- Make sure healthcare options include and account for same-sex partners and non-traditional family structures.
- Support your employees' consistent access to preventative medications like PrEP. HIV/AIDS can affect anyone and should be part of all travel safety strategies regardless of gender or sexual orientation.
- For travelers with HIV, take extra precautions to avoid the risk of common infections while traveling, such as ensuring safe drinking water, avoiding raw vegetables and animal products, and coming into contact with animal waste on sidewalks or in parks.
- HIV+ travelers should avoid hospitals and clinics treating patients with tuberculosis (TB).

Conclusions

The most important way to ensure the safety of LGBT+ employees is to create an environment where they are empowered to seek out the support and information they need. This means opening space for a collaborative conversation with LGBT+ employees about how their security needs may differ from those of other travelers and working with them to personalize protocols to their individual concerns. It also means making resources available and easy to use for employees who are not out at work. By being proactive, you help reduce stigma and increase the likelihood that your employees will receive the support they need to travel safely.