

How Welcoming is Downers Grove?

Community Assessment 2023

DECEMBER 2023

Presented by the
EQuality Downers Grove (EQDG)
Civic Affairs & Public Policy Committee



www.eqdg.org



Abstract

EQDG developed a questionnaire to explore both positive and negative experiences encountered daily by Downers Grove's LGBTQ+ residents in response to the current hostility and marginalization experienced nationally and locally by this community. The questionnaire was completed by both allies and LGBTQ+ community members, and responses between the two groups identified comparable observations and challenges. Visible displays of symbols and merchandise celebrating diversity in local businesses and organizations were recognized and appreciated as a demonstration of inclusivity and support. However, almost all respondents reported significant concerns about the threatening and divisive atmosphere created by hate groups and extremists, as well as the lack of decisive action steps by local government to clearly condemn hate speech, misinformation, and harassment. Respondents also reported a lack of awareness and education around diverse and marginalized populations as an impediment to acceptance. Results indicate that by increasing visibility of the LGBTQ+ community via symbols of support, planned social/educational events, and exposure to factual information dispelling misinformation and bias, the perception of Downers Grove as a welcoming village would increase. Furthermore, a clear condemnation by local government, schools, businesses, and community organizations of hate speech and harassment would significantly increase the perception of Downers Grove as a safe, inclusive, and welcoming village for all its residents.

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Introduction and Purpose

EQuality Downers Grove (EQDG) is a local non-profit organization working to create an accepting and equitable environment for LGBTQ+ people through education, support, social action, and advocacy. Presently, we are focused on addressing the current hostility and marginalization experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community here in Downers Grove. In order to do this, it is critical to identify and understand both the negative and positive experiences encountered every day in Downers Grove by our LGBTQ+ residents.

To better assess these issues, EQDG developed and distributed a questionnaire for residents of Downers Grove and the surrounding communities entitled “How Welcoming is Downers Grove?”. It is our hope that by identifying the specific factors contributing to the experience of a welcoming or unwelcoming environment, we can recommend structural, organizational, and behavioral changes that can be implemented within our community to create a more inclusive environment for all of its residents.

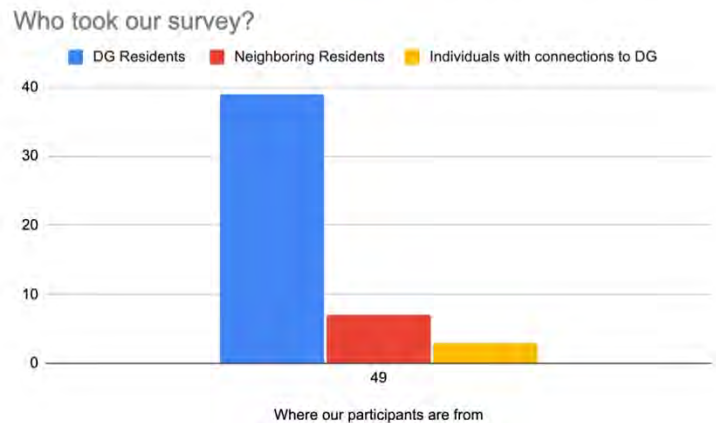
Methods

Data was collected over the course of two months via an anonymous online questionnaire consisting of demographic data collection and open-ended questions posed to members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies about both welcoming and unwelcoming experiences in Downers Grove (see Attachment 1). This questionnaire was distributed to community members via EQDG’s email list, through links on social media sites (Facebook), at meetings of an LGBTQ+ youth organization (Youth Outlook, Downers Grove chapter), and via flyers posted on bulletin boards and in windows of downtown Downers Grove businesses. Both qualitative and quantitative data were compiled and analyzed by members of the Civic Affairs and Public Policy Committee of EQDG, with results and conclusions cited below.

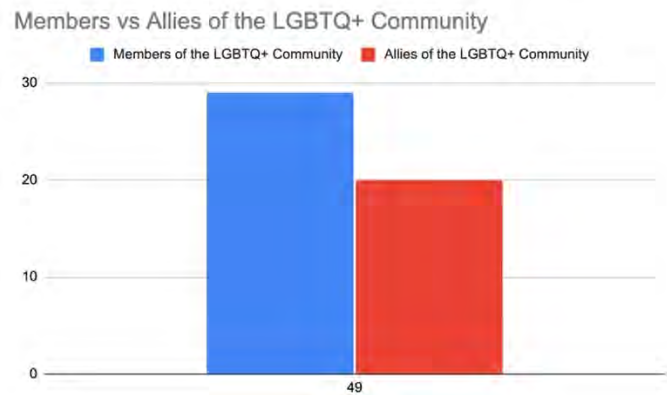
Results

Demographics/Quantitative Data

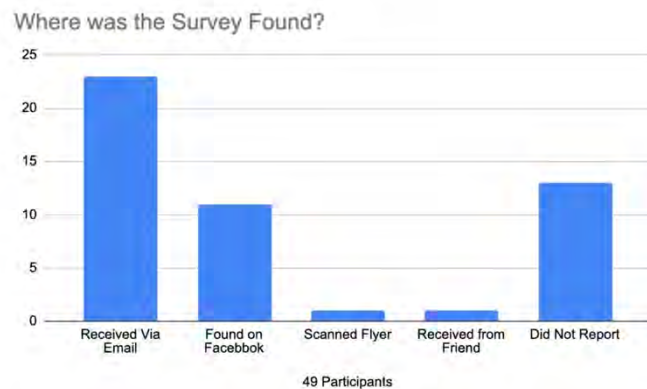
A total of 49 respondents completed the assessment survey. Of these 49 respondents, 39 (79.6%) identified themselves as residents of Downers Grove, 7 (14.3%) identified themselves as residents of a neighboring community to Downers Grove, and 3 (6.1%) identified themselves as not residing in or near Downers Grove but having connections to the community.



Of the 49 respondents, 29 (59.2%) identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, while 20 respondents (40.8%) identified as non-members/allies of the LGBTQ+ community.



A total of 36 respondents indicated where they found the link to the assessment survey; 13 respondents did not provide this information. Of these 36 respondents, 23 (63.9%) reported learning of the survey via email, 11 (30.6%) reported finding the survey on Facebook, one (2.8%) reported learning of the survey via a flyer, and one (2.8%) reported learning of the survey through a friend.



Qualitative Data: LGBTQ+ Community Members

Twenty-nine respondents (59.2%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “As an LGBTQ+ person, where in Downers Grove do you feel welcomed and supported, and what specifically are these places doing to create such an environment?”.

Local businesses and organizations cited by respondents as providing a welcoming environment included the Downers Grove Public Library, four restaurants/eateries, four coffee shops/bars, seven retail shops, one salon, two recreation/entertainment venues, two healthcare facilities/providers, one church, and one teacher at a Downers Grove high school (names of businesses/organizations available upon request). Actions cited by respondents causing them to feel welcomed and supported included the following:

- Displaying Pride symbols (flags, stickers, books and other merchandise celebrating diversity)
- Hiring queer employees
- Providing gender neutral bathrooms
- Asking for and providing preferred pronouns for customers/employees
- Treating customers with respect
- Participating in Pride-related events (window painting, hosting discussion groups, etc.)

Twenty-nine respondents (59.2%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “As an LGBTQ+ person, where in Downers Grove do you feel unwelcome or marginalized, and what specifically are these places doing to create such an environment?”.

Local businesses and organizations (names available upon request) cited by respondents as providing an unwelcoming environment included one salon, one gym, Downers Grove North and South High Schools, the Downers Grove Park District, area churches (unspecified), and local healthcare facilities (unspecified). Actions cited by respondents that made them feel unwelcome or marginalized included the following:

- Refusal of businesses to participate in Pride events or marketing (refusing to accept flyers, display inclusive symbols, have windows painted, etc.)
- Inaction on the part of school administrators, shop owners/patrons, and local government in pointing out, denouncing and administering consequences for instances of bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals

Twenty-nine respondents (59.2%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “What do you see/have you experienced as the biggest hurdles in Downers Grove to fostering acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community?”.

Hurdles to acceptance cited by respondents:

- Lack of LGBTQ+ representation in local government
- Lack of events/activities in the community celebrating diverse families
- Lack of education and awareness about diverse/marginalized populations
- Lack of action taken to counter misinformation, ignorance, and hatred being spread in schools, at DGPL and school board meetings, and on the streets of downtown Downers Grove

Twenty-nine respondents (59.2%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “In what specific ways can the Village of Downers Grove (including businesses, schools, community organizations, service providers, and local government officials) create a more welcoming environment for all?”.

Actions suggested by respondents to create a more welcoming environment:

- Providing more opportunities for LGBTQ+ inclusion in local government
- Displaying Pride symbols in local businesses
- Providing education in schools and workplaces about diverse/marginalized populations
- Hosting more community events celebrating diversity
- Verbalizing clear opposition to hatred, prejudice, misinformation, and bullying
- Taking action steps to stop harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals in schools and public spaces

Qualitative Data: Allies/Non-Members of the LGBTQ+ Community

Twenty respondents (40.8%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “What do you see/have you experienced as the biggest hurdles in Downers Grove to fostering acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community?”.

Hurdles to acceptance cited by respondents:

- Lack of knowledge and awareness about the LGBTQ+ community
- Proliferation of misinformation about LGBTQ+ individuals
- Intolerance, hatred, bullying, and harassment demonstrated by community members in public spaces and at board meetings
- Lack of action taken by local officials to identify and address instances of intolerance/aggression/threats of harm to LGBTQ+ individuals

Twenty respondents (40.8%) offered open-ended/free-form responses to the question “In what specific ways can the Village of Downers Grove (including businesses, schools, community organizations, service providers, and local government officials) create a more welcoming environment for all?”.

Actions suggested by respondents to create a more welcoming environment:

- Providing more inclusive programs, services, and events within the community
- Creating a safer, more inclusive environment in the schools
- Increasing educational opportunities to learn about marginalized groups and combat misinformation
- Increasing displays of welcoming signage celebrating diversity in local businesses and government/municipal buildings
- Appointing members of marginalized communities to leadership positions
- Taking a clear, strong, public stance against hate speech and actions of intolerance/aggression/threats of harm

Discussion

Although the sample size (49 people) was relatively small, a number of clear and consistent themes were present in the responses to the community assessment survey. There did not appear to be a significant difference between the perceptions of allies vs. those of LGBTQ+ community members with regard to current hurdles/unwelcoming experiences for marginalized community members in Downers Grove; both groups made similar observations and identified comparable obstacles/challenges. This agreement in response pattern indicates that the impact of aversive experiences/situations has been recognized throughout the community, regardless of whether or not the respondents themselves identify as LGBTQ+.

Most of the downtown Downers Grove businesses were recognized by LGBTQ+ community members as providing a welcoming experience, as indicated by visible displays of symbols and merchandise celebrating diversity (Pride flags, stickers, books, etc.). Again, these symbols were also recognized and appreciated by allies as a demonstration of inclusivity and support. Clearly, the data indicates that this visible support has a significant impact on community members’ perceptions of Downers Grove as a welcoming village.

Both allies and LGBTQ+ community members reported similar perceptions of the hurdles currently existing in Downers Grove that hinder acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Almost all respondents indicated significant concerns about the threatening and divisive atmosphere created by hate groups and extremists. The vitriol, rhetoric, and misinformation spewed by these groups at school and library board meetings has had a profound and pervasive impact on the respondents' perceptions of Downers Grove, despite the fact that these groups may not live or be based in the village. An additional hurdle reported by respondents was the lack of decisive action steps taken by local government officials to present a clear and vocal condemnation of hate speech, misinformation, bias, and harassment. Both allies and LGBTQ+ members reported feeling less safe based upon the inaction/lack of clear response to acts of intolerance and hatred at board meetings, in schools, and throughout the community. Respondents also noted a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in local government.

Conclusions

EQDG has interpreted the data collected from the community assessment survey in order to develop and propose changes that would increase the perception of Downers Grove as a welcoming village for all its residents.

For example, both allies and LGBTQ+ community members reported that visible displays of symbols and merchandise celebrating diversity created a welcoming experience for business patrons. These displays of visible support are a simple, cost-effective, low-commitment way for businesses, schools, and organizations to reinforce feelings of belonging within the community. By simply displaying an EQDG sticker or a Pride flag in their window (or other visible location), local businesses, schools, and organizations can take a significant step toward increasing feelings of safety, inclusion, and acceptance among their patrons.

Almost all respondents reported significant concerns about the threatening and divisive atmosphere created by hate groups, extremists, and even fellow community members emboldened by the lack of consequences for their words and actions. Residents stated that they wanted local officials to clearly denounce hate speech and take definitive actions to protect the rights and safety of all community members. Failure to condemn and take action against this hate speech results in emboldening the perpetrators, and is likely to lead to an increase in the frequency and severity of harassment. This pattern is substantiated by the concerning reports from multiple LGBTQ+ teen respondents of being openly harassed (being barked at, having homophobic slurs yelled at them) by community members on the streets of downtown Downers Grove.

The reported perception of Downers Grove as a hostile and unsafe village is an alarming development which should concern village officials, as this may have a profound impact on business investment and development, population growth, school enrollment, and other indicators of financial and social stability. If village officials, schools, and governing organizations were to unequivocally condemn and take action against incidents involving hate speech and harassment, this would certainly increase the perception of Downers Grove as a safe, inclusive, and welcoming village and may also discourage future incidents of harassment.

Another significant hurdle reported by respondents included the lack of awareness of and education around diverse and marginalized populations. Lack of exposure to factual, valid information about the LGBTQ+ community cultivates fear of the unknown, and feeds into the creation of a false and unfavorable narrative based upon misinformation and bias. Schools, libraries, workplaces and community organizations can counter this trend by increasing programs and events designed to increase awareness and acceptance of marginalized groups.

The importance of education to counter fearmongering and misinformation cannot be overstated, and would benefit all the residents of Downers Grove by directly challenging the psychological concept of “othering”. This concept of “othering” to create an “us vs. them” mentality results in the dehumanization and alienation of marginalized groups, and has been used throughout history to target such groups for oppression. By increasing exposure to and education around the LGBTQ+ community, incidents of harassment and bias in Downers Grove are likely to significantly decrease.

EQDG is proud to be a member of the Downers Grove community. It is our hope that the information and recommendations shared in this report will provide valuable guidelines for implementing changes within the village in order to ensure that our community remains a welcoming, safe, and inclusive place for all its residents.

Attachment 1 – Survey Questions

How Welcoming is Downers Grove?

EQDG is focused on addressing the current hostility and marginalization experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community by increasing visibility, support, education, and community activism in Downers Grove. To do this, it is critical to identify and understand the obstacles as well as the welcoming encounters experienced every day in DG by our LGBTQ+ residents. We appreciate you taking the time to fill out the questionnaire below, and thank you for helping to create a more equitable environment in DG!

** Indicates required question*

Please describe your connection to Downers Grove. *

I am a resident of Downers Grove.

I am a resident of a neighboring community to Downers Grove.

I do not reside in or near Downers Grove, but am connected to the community.

If you answered "I do not reside in or near Downers Grove, but am connected to the community", please describe your connection.

I identify as: *

A member of the LGBTQ+ community

A non-member/ally of the LGBTQ+ community

Questions for Members of the LGBTQ+ community:

1. As an LGBTQ+ person, where in DG do you feel welcomed and supported, and what specifically are these places doing to create such an environment? *
2. As an LGBTQ+ person, where in DG do you feel unwelcome or marginalized, and what specifically are these places doing to create such an environment? *
3. What do you see/have you experienced as the biggest hurdles in DG to fostering acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community? *
4. In what specific ways can the Village of DG (including businesses, schools, community organizations, service providers, and local government officials) create a more welcoming environment for all? *

Thank you for your responses! Please specify where you found the link to this questionnaire (which website, newsletter, social media platform, business flyer, etc.)

Questions for Allies of the LGBTQ+ community:

1. What do you see/have you experienced as the biggest hurdles in DG to fostering acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community? *

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2. In what specific ways can the Village of DG (including businesses, schools, community organizations, service providers, and local government officials) create a more welcoming environment for all? *

Thank you for your responses! Please specify where you found the link to this questionnaire (which website, newsletter, social media platform, business flyer, etc.)