The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund—known as Lambda Legal—is the oldest and largest legal organization in the United States that seeks to achieve equality for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people, and everyone living with HIV. It does this through impact litigation (pursuing cases that could establish important precedents), education, and public policy work. Lambda Legal has more than 100 staff in six offices around the country—New York, Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. In support of trans people, the organization has taken on and won cases that address the legal recognition of trans people, the conditions for trans prisoners, and anti-trans discrimination in employment, education, housing, and health care.

**Origins**

Lambda Legal was incorporated in 1973 in New York City by lawyer William Thom, who recognized the need for a nonprofit legal organization that fought for the civil rights of lesbian and gay people, similar to how groups existed to further the equality of women and people of color. In fact, Thom modeled the organization after the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, copying their papers of incorporation verbatim, except changing references from “Puerto Rican” to “lesbians and gay men.” Lambda Legal’s first client was itself; a New York court turned down Thom’s application for incorporation in 1971 on the grounds that he had not demonstrated that the organization would be for the public good. The decision was overturned on appeal by the highest court in New York State in 1973, allowing Thom to officially start the organization.

**Trans-Related Legal Work**

Trans people suffer persistent inequalities in all aspects of life. They experience rampant workplace, school, and housing discrimination; face difficulties in obtaining appropriate name and gender designations on their identity documents; and lack access to quality health care and to transition-related medical services, including in prisons. These disparities are exacerbated for trans people of color because they experience discrimination based on gender identity, race, and potentially other characteristics. Lambda Legal has been involved in cases in all of these areas.

**Employment**

Employment is one of the most legally challenging and personally difficult areas for trans people. They are often passed over in the hiring process, and if they are able to find employment, they frequently experience privacy violations, harassment, and even physical and sexual violence on the job. One of Lambda Legal’s cases challenging discrimination against trans people in the workplace...
resulted in a landmark decision in *Glenn v. Brumby* (2011). The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit ruled that a government worker who fires a trans employee because of their gender non-conformity violates the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment by engaging in sex-based discrimination.

**Education**

Trans students frequently feel unsafe and experience discrimination at school both from other students and from teachers and administrators. In 2016, Lambda Legal filed a lawsuit on behalf of three trans students against a suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, school district that required students to use the restroom that corresponded to their sex assigned at birth. The organization won a preliminary injunction that halted the policy and then reached a settlement, which required the district to allow students to use the restrooms that reflect their gender identity (*Evancho v. Pine-Richland School District*, 2017). Lambda Legal won a similar case against a suburban Jacksonville, Florida, school district in 2018 (*Adams v. School Board of St. Johns County, Florida*), which has been appealed by the district.

**Housing**

Trans people experience high rates of housing discrimination, eviction, and homelessness in the United States. Lambda Legal’s work in this area included a lawsuit against a Boulder County, Colorado, property owner who refused to rent a housing unit to a same-sex couple, one of whom was trans, and their children because she worried that doing so would jeopardize her standing in the community. A U.S. district court ruled that the property owner’s actions had violated both the federal Fair Housing Act and the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act (*Smith v. Avanti*, 2017).

**Legal Recognition**

Having the appropriate name and gender marker on legal documents is critical for trans people, as it not only validates their identities but also prevents them from having their privacy violated and being subjected to possible harassment and discrimination. Lambda Legal has challenged governments that refuse to correct gender markers on trans people’s identity documents. In Puerto Rico, the organization won a groundbreaking case in which the court found that refusing to correct the gender marker on trans people’s birth certificates violates their constitutional and human rights, for “the right to identify our own existence lies at the heart of one’s humanity” (*Arroyo v. Rosselló*, 2018). Lambda Legal has also won cases in Idaho and Kansas to allow trans people to correct their birth certificates.

**Health Care and the Rights of Incarcerated Trans People**

Lambda Legal has challenged the categorical denials of transition-related health care in state Medicaid plans and in state employee health care plans. The organization has also fought for the right of incarcerated trans people to access medically necessary health care. A lawsuit against the Missouri Department of Corrections resulted in trans people’s being able to access transition-related treatments, including hormone therapy, permanent body hair removal, and gender-affirming beauty products, whether or not they had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria before entering prison (*Hicklin v. Precynde*, et al., 2018).

Other prison cases addressed by Lambda Legal have involved trans inmates experiencing harassment and violence because of not being housed according to their gender identity. It sued the Texas Department of Criminal Justice on behalf of Passion Star, a trans woman who was incarcerated in a male facility in Texas, which led to her being repeatedly physically and sexually assaulted. A victory in the case resulted in Star receiving monetary compensation when she was released from prison and a change to the department’s policy on the incarceration of trans prisoners.

*Sasha Jean Buchert and Ethan Rice*

See also Gender on Legal Documents; Health Care Access, Legal Issues; Marriage, Divorce, and Parenting, Legal Issues; Inmates and Incarceration; Nondiscrimination Laws, Federal, State, and Local; Workplace Policies; Youth and Teens, Legal Issues