

OAKLAND, CA – There are an estimated 25 LGBTQ community centers in California, but Oakland has been the only major city in the state without one – until now. Oakland's first-ever multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-gender, and intergenerational [LGBTQ Community Center](#) is scheduled to open September 7, just days before the annual Oakland Pride parade and festival.

Founders Jeff Myers and Joe Hawkins sat in the future multi-purpose room of the new Oakland LGBTQ+ community center, a space they share with other non-profits and small businesses, filled with optimism and pride. “For the first time in its history, the city of Oakland will have an official [LGBTQ+ community](#) center that serves the diversity of our community regardless of age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but will be focused on the most vulnerable and marginalized among us.” Hawkins said.

Myers, the new non-profit’s [Board President](#), a surgical scrub nurse and frequent community volunteer, expressed that “This is a big moment for us! Having a safe space is critical, not just to come together, but a place to find support and community at a time when [hate crimes directed at our community](#) are on the rise.” He said.

Although acceptance of LGBTQ+ people has increased over the years, demonstrated by the 2008 legalization of same-sex marriages in California, a recent [California Department Of Justice \(DOJ\) report](#) shows that California has experienced an 11% increase in hate crimes since 2015, and the top two targets of hate crimes, according to the report, were African-Americans, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition, a [2016 report by the Human Rights Commission \(HRC\)](#), ranking municipalities that demonstrate how they work to support the LGBTQ+ people who live and work in their cities, of the top 10 largest cities in California, Oakland ranked in the bottom 3 cities ahead of Santa Ana and Fresno, with a Municipal Equality Index (MEI) score of 77 out of a possible max score of 100. Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, and Long beach all received a score of 100 and each of those cities have successful LGBTQ+ community centers.

East Bay cities have had a tough time sustaining centers for the LGBTQ community. Over a five-year period, centers specifically targeting LGBTQ people in the East Bay have closed. The [Lighthouse LGBTQ Community Center in Hayward](#) closed in 2014 after serving the community for 14 years, followed by the closing of the [Sexual Minority Alliance Of Alameda County \(SMAAC\) Youth Center](#), which served youth of color in Oakland for over a decade, was destroyed by a fire in 2012 and unfortunately never recovered and went out of business in 2015.

Both Hawkins and Myers are longtime residents of Oakland and LGBTQ+ community organizers. Joe Hawkins spearheaded efforts to start [Oakland Pride](#) and is a founding member. He served as Oakland Pride Co-chair for the first few years of its existence. Hawkins also has an impressive track record working as a non-profit executive creating and leading projects on a range of issues including housing and homelessness, technology workforce development and training for youth, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and variety of social justice issues affecting marginalized communities. Jeff Myers is a former union Vice President and served as the Volunteer Coordinator at Oakland Pride and was recruited by Hawkins to help out in 2010. “One of the things that I was very attracted to when Joe first reached out to me when he was the Co-chair of Oakland Pride, was pride's mission statement and its goal of helping to facilitate the creation of Oakland’s first community center serving all LGBTQ+ people. I was so excited about helping to raise money to open a center. But after years of talking about making it happen with no progress, I reached out to Joe and we decided that the time was now!” Myers said.

“So many of us were anxious about what is next and where do we go from here after the elections. Talk of opening a center had been on the table since we included it in the mission statement of Oakland Pride over 8 years ago, but discussions between Jeff and I accelerated after the elections. It was just the kick in the butt that we needed to get the ball rolling.” Hawkins said.

And that is just exactly what they have done. The two started a new non-profit called the "[Oakland LGBTQ Community Center Inc.](#)" in June of 2017, the mission states “The Oakland LGBTQ Community Center Inc., is committed to supporting and enhancing the well-being of LGBTQ individuals, our families and allies.”

The non-profit organization has secured a headquarters space in the “Co-Munity building” at [3207 Lakeshore Ave.](#), just above a mobile phone store in Oakland. “Considering the high cost of rents, we were very fortunate to have stumbled upon this place to get us started and to work with such a welcoming operator. We are also excited about the Lake Merritt area location, which is very LGBTQ+ friendly and in district 2, which is led by “two spirited” city council member Abel Guillen, who has also generously donated \$1,000 dollars to the organization” Hawkins said. The space secured by the new [Oakland LGBTQ+ Community Center](#) is in the offices of “Startup Admin Co-Munity” which offers startups services to include offices with shared spaces and the administrative support needed to build a successful organization and expandability as they grow. “There is much agreement in the community that this Lake Merritt location is ideal and is in a popular LGBTQ+ destination area here in Oakland. But we have funded this out of our own pockets and in order to stay here, we need help reaching people who can help us raise the money necessary to operate at this site.” Myers said. According to Myers, the new center is the main tenant in the Co-Munity space, with a monthly rent of around \$5,000. Other tenants that the organization have attracted to the space include [Spectrum Queer Media](#) and the [LGBTQ Perinatal Wellness Associates of the Bay Area](#). “Oakland's LGBTQ+ community is the most diverse underserved population in Oakland, in the most [racially/ethnically diverse city](#) in America. “Our new center will offer an ambitious new model of LGBTQ+ service delivery in our city, where a variety of services for our community will be delivered to a diverse LGBTQ+ population under one roof and working in collaboration with other organizations. This is something that has never been attempted before in Oakland.” Hawkins said.

The packed grand opening took place on Thursday, September 7, from 6pm-9pm and featured guest speakers including Mayor Libby Schaaf just days before the [Oakland Pride Parade & Festival](#) on Sunday, September 10.

“We have already attracted over 400 volunteers and our calendar is filling up fast with community building activities to include film screenings, forums and workshops. We also hosted a series of community service input meetings in August, to determine which services the community feels are most important and/or are missing here in Oakland, and we will fundraise towards those goals.” Hawkins said.

“The local LGBTQ+ community needs a physical space in which to gather and share resources and to support one another. Our community is desperately underserved in Oakland. The LGBTQ+ community is still marginalized — especially LGBTQ+ people of color, youth, seniors, and transgender individuals which make up a large part of Oakland's diverse community — it’s really important for all of us to be united and we believe that this new center is the missing link that will facilitate that.” Myers said.

For more information about the Oakland LGBTQ+ Community Center, and/or to make a donation visit their website at www.oaklandlgbtqcenter.org or joehawkins777@gmail.com