



LGBT students praise FIU for readying campus' first gender-neutral bathroom

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Gaby Benavente, 20, a transgender student at Florida International University, stands in front of the bathrooms scheduled for renovations at the Graham Center, FIU's student union. As the bathrooms are renovated in late Spring 2015, a storage closet close by will be turned into the university's first gender neutral bathroom. MARIA SOLEDAD LORENZINO / SOUTH FLORIDA NEWS SERVICE

At home, Gaby Benavente dresses as a man and goes by her legal name, Gabriel, to please her parents.

At Florida International University, Benavente, 20, a male-to-female transgender student, is able to express herself as a woman, but she still runs into trouble when using bathrooms on campus that are marked "Men" and "Women."

Benavente uses men's rooms at school because her family prefers she present herself as a man, but that makes Gaby feel uncomfortable and out of place.

"If you choose the [bathroom] that you identify with, you could potentially be subject to ridicule, but if you go to the other one, it almost feels like you're lying to yourself," Benavente said.

That will soon change.

FIU is catching up to an initiative most Florida state schools have been implementing for years: The university's first single-stall gender-neutral bathroom will break ground by the end of spring.

"We recognize the need and agreed with the need," said Larry Lunsford, vice president of Student Affairs at FIU.

The university will turn a storage room into a bathroom at Graham Center, the student union building at the Modesto Maidique campus in West Miami-Dade. Construction will begin at the same time as renovations of existing gender-specific bathrooms. No plans are in place for Biscayne Bay campus.

The project will cost about \$300,000 and is funded by the Capital Improvement Trust Fund, a state fund allocated for student facilities, Lunsford said.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocates say these bathrooms are important to keep students like Benavente comfortable and safe.

On Tuesday, Miami-Dade commissioners updated the county's 1998 human-rights ordinance (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article4249334.html>) by banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression. Much of the heated talk at this week's four-hour public hearing about transgender rights involved discussion of public restrooms.

Kaitlin Legg, assistant director of the LGBT resource center at the University of North Florida, said her school began adding gender-neutral bathrooms about five years ago, with a total so far of 14.

Legg said the big push for adding bathrooms in more locations ramped up this year after a female-to-male transgender student reported he was assaulted and verbally abused while using a men's bathroom in February.

"The problem is that there aren't enough [bathrooms]. The student had no choice and was assaulted," Legg said. "Sometimes, it takes something to happen for people to listen."

Other schools have been adding gender-neutral bathrooms for several years: University of Florida has about 25; University of South Florida has 56; University of Central Florida has 17; Florida State University has four; and Florida Atlantic University has 22.

All bathrooms are single-stall and handicapped accessible to comply with the American Disabilities Act.

Suchi Daniels, project manager for USF facilities planning and construction, said the university added most of its unisex, single-stall family restrooms in the last four years to comply with ADA regulations.

"A lot of buildings were there before ADA was in effect. We have been adding accessible bathrooms," she said. "What we have found is that it served many user groups."

The state universities considered key locations for the bathrooms because they couldn't add them in every building right away.

Corey King, interim vice president of Student Affairs at FAU, said the school has been strategically selecting areas of high traffic to add gender-neutral and family restrooms in the last two years.

Places of high student traffic at schools tend to be wellness centers, student unions and auditoriums.

FIU hopes its initiative will also service a wide range of needs.

"There are students who wear adult diapers who would like the privacy of being able to change, as well as families changing a baby's diaper," Lunsford said.

For Rosanna Rizo, executive director of the Pride Student Union at FSU, the biggest hurdle has been not adding more bathrooms but changing the signs that identify them.

Signs currently use a fused gender symbol, but students want a drawing that takes gender completely out of the equation.

"We are changing this whole culture of having a sex sign," Rizo said. "It's a toilet."

Student advocates at FIU say it's been a long time coming.

"There needs to be a private place to use a restroom. There needs to be that option," said Jaylon Hadley, president of the Gay-Straight Alliance advocacy group at FIU. "There are still things we need to do for our trans community that has been lacking here."

