

Making Gender-Affirming Surgeries a Possibility for Low-Income Transgender People

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For many transgender people, undergoing gender-affirming surgery is a crucial step toward a healthy gender transition. While not all transgender people need or want gender-affirming surgeries to be part of their transitions, receiving such surgeries may be life saving for some who do.

The [American Medical Association](#) has established that gender-affirming surgery is effective and medically necessary for many individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is a serious medical condition resulting from an incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's gender assigned at birth. The symptoms of gender dysphoria can include distress, depression and suicidality.

[Surveys show that 41 percent of transgender Americans report having attempted suicide](#), and there is a clear link between these high rates and the lack of transition-related health care coverage.

Gaining access to gender-affirming surgeries can be an insurmountable challenge for many transgender people. Lacking legal protection in many states from [discrimination](#) based on gender identity, transgender people often [disproportionately struggle](#) to find employment and housing, let alone save enough money for surgery. Even for those who have health insurance, gender-affirming surgery is often out of reach. Many insurance policies [exclude coverage](#) of transition-related medical treatments altogether, leaving a large number of transgender people with no choice but to pay for costly gender-affirming surgeries out-of-pocket.

Recognizing this dire need, transgender advocates Dru Levasseur and Tony Ferraiolo co-founded [the Jim Collins Foundation](#), a non-profit organization that covers the cost of gender-affirming surgeries for low-income transgender people who cannot afford to pay for this necessary medical treatment. Each year, the Jim Collins Foundation reviews hundreds of grant applications and selects recipients based on a combination of demonstrated financial need and readiness for surgery. Since its founding in 2008, the Jim Collins Foundation has awarded 20 grants to assist transgender individuals in achieving a healthy gender transition.

In 2017, Proskauer pro bono counsel Erin Meyer joined the Jim Collins Foundation's board of directors at the invitation of Dru Levasseur, the foundation's co-founder. The two first met in 2009 while working at [Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund](#) (TLDEF), where Erin—then a first-year law student—became keenly aware that “the transgender rights movement was gaining momentum and would become cutting-edge civil rights work of our time.” As TLDEF's staff attorney at the time, Dru became Erin's long-time mentor, and over the past decade they have [continued to work together](#) to advance their shared goal of achieving justice and equality for transgender people.

Erin's work with the Jim Collins Foundation represents a continuation of Proskauer's commitment to pro bono, and the Firm's history of advocating for LGBT rights. In helping transgender immigrants win asylum in the United States, [challenging state policies](#) preventing transgender people from amending the gender marker on their drivers' licenses, and drafting [model hospital policies](#) to ensure equal access to health care for transgender patients, Proskauer has committed itself to assisting transgender people through its pro bono practice. With Erin's current position on the Jim Collins Foundation's board of directors, Proskauer is honored to align itself with the foundation's important mission, one that also reflects the Firm's values of [inclusion and diversity](#).

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