

Trust Infrastructure for the Digital Age

Lessons from LGBTQ+ Youth Organizing in the South

HOW TO USE THIS PRIMER

This primer offers a practical framework for understanding how trust is built, broken, and sustained across human and digital systems. It is designed for people working at the intersection of community care, technology, philanthropy, public systems, and youth leadership.

- Use it to:
- name where trust is breaking in a system;
 - identify which layer of trust is most affected;
 - examine how technology is helping or harming reliability;
 - redesign one handoff, pathway, or practice so trust has a better chance of holding.

The framework is grounded in SC BLOOM, a statewide collaboration supporting LGBTQ+ youth across South Carolina. While the case study is specific to LGBTQ+ youth organizing in the South, the framework can be adapted by any community, organization, institution, or technology team working to make systems more reliable, accountable, and shaped by the people who depend on them.

Trust is not only relational. Trust is infrastructural.

Trust is often treated as something that emerges from strong relationships. Relationships matter deeply. But relationships alone cannot carry the full weight of care, coordination, safety, access, and accountability.

Trust also depends on systems people can rely on.

For LGBTQ+ youth in the South, especially those who are BIPOC, rural, low-income, trans, and gender-expansive, trust is not abstract. It shapes whether a young person seeks help, returns after a first interaction, follows a referral, joins a group, discloses a need, or believes a system will protect rather than expose them.

In the digital age, trust moves through both people and systems: referral pathways, communication platforms, intake forms, telehealth tools, online communities, databases, moderation policies, school surveillance technologies, and AI-mediated visibility.

When those systems are clear, accountable, and shaped by community, they can strengthen trust. When they are fragmented, confusing, extractive, or unsafe, they deepen mistrust.

Core shift: Programs create experiences. Systems determine whether those experiences can be relied on.

Trust infrastructure is the set of relationships, practices, pathways, technologies, and accountability systems that make care reliable.

Programs create moments. Trust infrastructure sustains care.

It is not simply whether people feel warmly toward an organization, institution, platform, or program. It is whether they can count on it to follow through. The visible moment matters. But trust is often built, or broken, by what happens before and after that moment.

Programs Create Moments	Trust Infrastructure Sustains Care
A retreat	Follow-up after the retreat
A referral	Confirmation that the referral landed
Youth feedback	Evidence that feedback changed decisions
A digital tool	Privacy, accessibility, and safe-use practices
A partnership	Clear roles, shared accountability, and communication rhythms

Where Trust Breaks + The Five Layers

Trust often breaks at transitions.

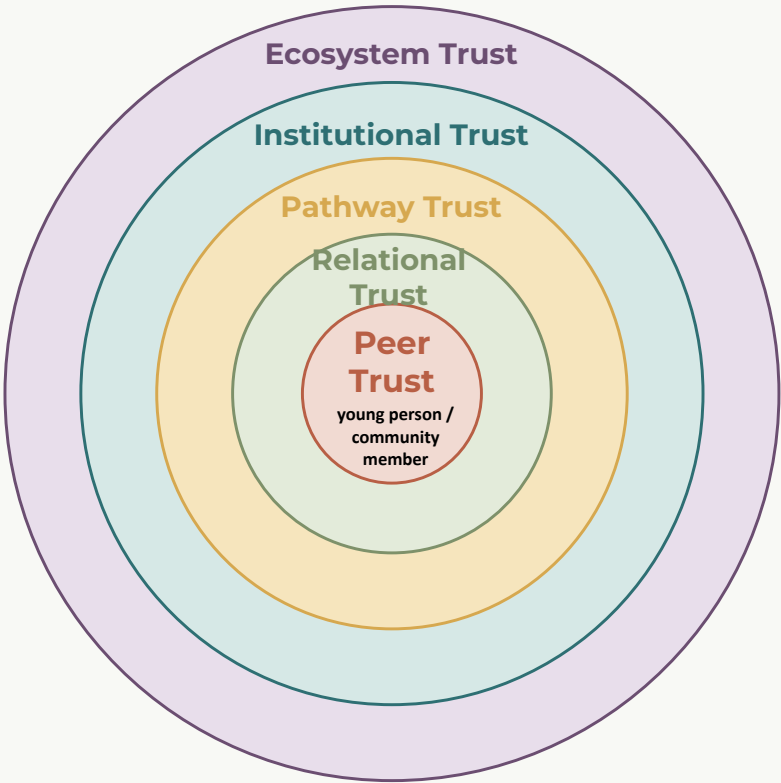
Trust does not usually collapse all at once. It erodes through repeated failures of follow-through, clarity, safety, and accountability.

In modern systems, trust often breaks:

- between invitation and participation;
- between program and follow-up;
- between referral and care;
- between one organization and another;
- between community voice and real decision-making;
- between digital access and actual safety.

For LGBTQ+ youth in South Carolina, this can look like a young person asking for therapy but not knowing the next step. It can look like attending a support group that creates belonging but offers no continuity afterward. It can look like an intake form asking for sensitive information without explaining how it will be used. It can look like a school surveillance tool flagging or outing a student. It can look like youth being invited to share their voice, but never seeing what changed because of it.

These are not only communication problems. They are infrastructure problems.



Visual idea: trust surrounds the person being asked to rely on the system.

Layer	Core Question / Description
1. Peer Trust	Belonging with one another. Peer trust is built through shared experience, youth-to-youth credibility, mutual support, and spaces where people feel less alone. For many young people, peer trust is the first doorway into a larger system of care.
2. Relational Trust	Trust in the people providing support. Relational trust depends on consistency, confidentiality, cultural responsiveness, and care. It is the difference between someone feeling managed and someone feeling met.
3. Pathway Trust	Systems actually work when needed. Pathway trust lives in referrals, handoffs, follow-up, care navigation, crisis response, and next steps. This is where trust often breaks, because even strong relationships can fail when the pathway is unclear.
4. Institutional Trust	Organizations are consistent and accountable. Institutional trust grows when organizations keep promises, share power, communicate clearly, protect information, and remain present after the first moment of contact.
5. Ecosystem Trust	Partners operate as a coordinated whole. Ecosystem trust exists when support is not dependent on one person, one city, one organization, or one open door. It requires shared roles, shared accountability, and enough coordination that people can move through a network without having to start over every time.

Key insight: Trust is layered. If one layer breaks, the whole experience can become unreliable.

Where Trust Travels Now

Human systems, digital systems, and the handoffs between them

Technology is not separate from trust infrastructure. It is one of the places trust now travels.

For LGBTQ+ youth, a pathway to care may move through a group chat, an intake form, a telehealth platform, a referral spreadsheet, a case note, a school monitoring system, a social media algorithm, or an AI-generated search result before it ever becomes a conversation with another person.

Each of these systems can either make care feel more reliable or make support feel more confusing, risky, or unreachable.

A digital system becomes trust infrastructure only when it strengthens the human commitments underneath it: clarity, consent, follow-through, privacy, accountability, and repair.

Technology becomes trust infrastructure when it helps people know what happens next, who is responsible, how information is protected, how to stay connected, and what to do when something breaks.

The digital handoff

Trust often breaks at transitions. In the digital age, many of those transitions now happen through technology.

A digital handoff happens when a young person fills out an intake form and waits for a response. It happens when a support group facilitator sends a therapy referral. It happens when a youth joins a virtual space and decides whether it feels safe. It happens when a partner organization enters information into a shared system. It happens when a platform recommends, suppresses, flags, or removes LGBTQ+ content.

The question is not only: Does the tool work?

The deeper question is: Does the person using it feel held by the system behind it?

Trust Layer	Digital Touchpoint	Trust Question
Peer Trust	Group chats, online communities, virtual support groups	Does this help young people feel safer and less alone?
Relational Trust	Teletherapy, secure messaging, follow-up texts	Does this deepen connection or replace care with a portal?
Pathway Trust	Intake forms, referral tracking, shared calendars, reminders	Does someone know what happens next and who owns it?
Institutional Trust	Data practices, consent forms, privacy policies, digital records	Does the organization protect people’s information and explain its use?
Ecosystem Trust	Partner databases, cross-region referral systems, shared communication tools	Do partners coordinate better, or does each system create another silo?

Five principles for digital trust infrastructure

Clarity

People know what happens next.

Consent

People understand what information is collected, why, and who can access it.

Continuity

Digital tools strengthen follow-up instead of creating dead ends.

Accountability

Someone owns the handoff when the system fails.

Community Power

The people most affected help shape the tool, pathway, or policy.

Technology does not create trust on its own. But when it is designed around human needs, shared power, and reliable follow-through, it can help trust travel across distance, organizations, and time.

Case Study: SC BLOOM

From fragmented support to coordinated trust infrastructure

SC BLOOM, which stands for Building Leadership, Outreach, and Opportunities for Mobilization, is a statewide collaboration led by We Are Family with the Harriet Hancock Center and Uplift Outreach Center. Together, the partners anchor LGBTQ+ youth support across three regions of South Carolina: the Lowcountry, the Midlands, and the Upstate.

SC BLOOM emerged in a state where LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those who are BIPOC, low-income, rural, trans, and gender-expansive, often face uneven access to affirming support, care, and connection. Many young people have already experienced broken trust in schools, healthcare, social services, families, and community institutions before they ever reach a program.

SC BLOOM began in 2024 with HIV prevention education through a statewide virtual support group. As young people named what they needed, the work expanded to include retreats, wellness programming, leadership development, peer support, mental health supports, and linkages to affirming care.

In its pilot year, SC BLOOM reached more than 2,000 unduplicated LGBTQ+ young people through more than 8,000 service interactions across South Carolina.

But the story is not only scale. The story is what had to be built underneath that scale: trusted regional anchors, youth leadership, peer support, mental health pathways, warm referrals, shared governance, partner coordination, virtual and in-person connection, and repeated follow-through.



The visible part of trust is connection.
The invisible part is coordination.

SC BLOOM through the Five Layers

Trust Layer	What It Looks Like in SC BLOOM
Peer Trust	Retreats, support groups, peer outreach, Youth Ambassadors, shared experiences of belonging
Relational Trust	Facilitators, therapists, youth workers, and regional staff showing up with consistency and cultural responsiveness
Pathway Trust	Warm referrals, therapy access, care navigation, follow-up after programs, clearer next steps for youth seeking support
Institutional Trust	Monthly partner coordination, shared decisions, youth leadership structures, transparency across organizations
Ecosystem Trust	Lowcountry, Midlands, and Upstate anchors working together as a statewide network of care

What makes it trust infrastructure?

SC BLOOM is not only a collection of programs. It is a coordinated system designed to help young people experience care as something reliable, not accidental.

The model asks:

- What happens after a young person shows up?
- Who follows up?
- Who owns the handoff?
- How do partners coordinate?
- How do young people shape the work?
- How does trust travel across regions, relationships, and systems?

Design Prompts + Action Tool

Designing better handoffs

Most trust breakdowns happen in the handoff.

A handoff is any moment when responsibility, information, care, or power moves from one person, system, or organization to another.

A handoff might be:

- a youth being referred from a support group to therapy;
- a regional partner connecting someone to another organization;
- an online intake form becoming a real follow-up call;
- youth feedback becoming a decision;
- a virtual event becoming an ongoing leadership pathway;
- a crisis conversation becoming a care plan.

A trustworthy system is not one where nothing ever breaks. It is one where people know what happens next, who owns the repair, and how accountability works.

The Trust Infrastructure Design Check

Use these questions to redesign one handoff, pathway, or practice.

Design Question	What It Helps Clarify
Power: Who needs more say or decision-making?	Whether the people most affected can shape the system
Consistency: What should happen every time?	What makes the experience predictable
Role: Who owns the follow-through?	Who is responsible for the next step
Pathway: What is the next step?	How someone moves from need to support
Accountability: How will people know it worked?	How the system learns, repairs, and improves

Trust was breaking at _____. We redesigned _____ by _____.

Examples

- Trust was breaking at referrals. We redesigned the referral pathway by assigning one staff person to confirm receipt within 48 hours.
- Trust was breaking after youth programs. We redesigned follow-up by creating a standard check-in within one week of every retreat.
- Trust was breaking at youth feedback. We redesigned decision-making by reporting back what changed because of youth input.
- Trust was breaking between partners. We redesigned coordination by creating a monthly shared agenda focused on handoffs, stuck referrals, and emerging needs.

Prompts by audience

For Community Organizations

- Where does trust break after someone says yes?
- Who owns follow-up?
- Which pathways depend too much on one person?
- Where are community members invited to speak but not given power?
- What can become more predictable in the next 30 days?

For Funders

- Are we funding programs only, or the coordination that makes programs trustworthy?
- Are we resourcing the invisible labor of follow-up, data protection, partnership, and youth leadership?
- Are reporting requirements strengthening trust or extracting time from it?
- Are we supporting organizations to build durable systems, not just visible outputs?

For Policymakers

- Do current policies increase or reduce surveillance risk for marginalized youth?
- Are systems designed to protect privacy and autonomy?
- Do public systems make referrals easier to complete or harder to navigate?
- Are young people and community organizations involved before decisions are made?

For Tech Leaders

- Who is asked to trust this tool, and what power do they have to shape it?
- What happens when the tool fails?
- How are privacy, consent, and data use explained?
- Does the product make care more reliable, or does it create another broken pathway?
- Does the system support warm handoffs, or does it automate abandonment?

Trust infrastructure is built in the places people often overlook: the handoff, the follow-up, the referral, the feedback loop, the shared decision, the data practice, the moderation policy, the meeting rhythm, and the moment someone asks, “Can I rely on this?”

If we want communities to trust the systems being built around them, we have to design those systems with them. Trust is not a soft outcome. It is infrastructure.