

The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

International Gay Information Center, Inc.

Gay Switchboard of New York, Inc.

Records, 1972-1983

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Summary

Main Entry: Gay Switchboard of New York, Inc.

Title: Records, 1972-1983

Size: 7.25 lf.

Access: Access to materials in Series 5 restricted until 2058.

Source: Gift of International Gay Information Center (via John Hammond), 1988.

Historical Statement: Records of a gay community switchboard in New York City, founded in 1971.

Description: Administrative records, telephone logs, and internal and external ephemera generated by Gay Switchboard of New York, Inc., for the period between March 1972 and July 1983. The logs reveal the social, political, and recreational concerns of the New York gay community before the impact of AIDS.

Historical Note

According to the Gay Switchboard Handbook (1980 revision), the idea for a gay community switchboard in New York was first suggested during a meeting of gay activists in the Spring of 1971. Represented at the meeting were the Gay Activists Alliance, Beyond, and former members of the already disbanded Gay Liberation Front. After much discussion, a group of eight individuals set out to establish what would become the Gay Switchboard. In the words of one of the Gay Switchboard's information packets (dated 1978):

The object was to provide information of interest to Gay people in an unbiased, non-judgmental manner while allowing volunteers the option of expressing their own point of view, and to counsel people to the best of their ability. It was decided that the organization would remain independent.

Fund-raising began during the Summer of 1971, and with it the difficult task of finding a suitable location for the switchboard (the switchboard had five different addresses during the period covered by the collection). In the Fall of 1971, space was leased at 247 West 11th Street, and the Switchboard received its first call on 13 January 1972.

From the first, the Switchboard was operated by a volunteer staff, and supported entirely by voluntary contributions; there was no charge for a physician, lawyer, or counsellor to be listed for referrals, or for a bar or baths to be recommended. The Switchboard operated three telephone shifts (3PM to 6PM, 6PM to 9PM, and 9PM to midnight) with at least two people per shift. The volunteers were prepared to deal with matters ranging from entertainment suggestions to suicide calls. By the late 1970s, switchboard staffers estimated that they were handling 20,000 calls a year. Each call was carefully logged according to shift and category, and the resulting log sheets make up the bulk of the collection.

In October, 1977, the Gay Switchboard, in association with Dykes and Tykes Legal Custody Center, and Gay and Lesbian Community Services of New York, Inc., leased a suite of offices at 110 East 23rd Street, and founded the Gay and Lesbian Services Center. The Switchboard maintained its independent identity, however, and in November, 1977, was incorporated as Gay Switchboard of New York, Inc.

Although the present collection stops in July, 1983, the Switchboard remained in operation. In the mid-1980s, it moved to a location at 648 Broadway, and later merged with the Lesbian Switchboard to form the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of New York, Inc.

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of the collection consists of the telephone logs compiled by the Gay Switchboard during the period from March 1972 to July 1983. Each of the three nightly shifts has its own notebook page or log sheet, with categories of calls and (after September 1980) numerical summaries. As such, the logs reveal the social, political, and recreational concerns of the New York gay community before the impact of AIDS. It should be noted that these log sheets fall into two types. Those compiled between March 1972 and September 1979 were kept in a series of bound notebooks and occasional loose sheets, and contain a brief subjective description of the nature of the call. Starting in October 1980, the Switchboard began to use pre-printed log sheets, with set call categories and summary information for each shift. There is gap in the log sheets between September 1979 and October 1980.

The Switchboard made a great effort to provide accurate and courteous service to callers. Much of the correspondence and reference material in the collection are concerned with updating files of names and addresses. The Switchboard also printed a series of procedural handbooks for volunteers.

Although the Switchboard was resolutely apolitical during the period represented in the collection, it could not help but be affected by the events occurring around it (see, for example, the materials generated by the Switchboard's participation in the annual Gay Pride Week activities). This material is supplemented by a series of materials concerning goods and services (particularly medical and legal) listed by the Switchboard. As noted earlier, during the period represented by the collection, the Switchboard was supported entirely by voluntary contributions; there was no charge for a physician, lawyer, counsellor, bathhouse, or gay bar to be listed with the Switchboard.

The structure of the Switchboard was generally informal, therefore such materials as administrative and financial records are sparse. A sense of the daily operation of the Switchboard can be better judged from the series of general correspondence, mailing lists (undated) of individuals and organizations active in the homophile movement, and ephemera either generated by the Switchboard or received from other homophile organizations and publications.

Series Descriptions

Series 1: Administrative Records

- Box 27 Board and Committee Minutes. Includes miscellaneous administrative papers concerning operations of the Switchboard (proposed layout of facilities, etc.).
- Box 28 Financial Records. Annual reports, cancelled checks, bank statements, telephone bills.
- Box 29 Procedural Records. Handbooks, guidelines, orientation materials, printed announcements, etc. used internally to monitor and standardize Switchboard procedures and responses; photograph.
- Box 30 Reference Materials. Materials used by the switchboard in formulating answers to telephone queries. Includes maps, schedules of special events, listings of physicians, lawyers, etc., and names of recreational establishments (bars, baths, clubs, etc.).
- Box 31 Correspondence concerning the listing of goods, services, and activities with the Gay Switchboard.
- Box 32 General correspondence. Concerns non-telephone activities of the Gay Switchboard: community activities, relations with other organizations, etc.

Series 2: Telephone Logs

- Box 33 Bound log sheets of incoming calls. 37 notebooks, 3/72-8/79. Note: Dates on notebook covers are not reliable.
- Box 34-40 Unbound log sheets of incoming calls, with summaries of calls by shift and by subject, 9/80-7/83.
- Box 34: 9/80-3/81
Box 35: 4/81-9/81
Box 36: 10/81-3/82
Box 37: 4/82-11/82
Box 38: 12/82-3/83
Box 39: 4/83-6/83
Box 40: 7/83
- Box 41 Bound log book of outgoing calls, 1/72-6/75.

Series 3: Mailing Lists

- Box 42 Mailing lists. Undated lists of individuals, alphabetically arranged in two bound notebooks.
- Box 43 Mailing lists. Undated lists of organizations, alphabetically by state, in three bound notebooks.

Series 4: Ephemera

- Box 44 Gay Switchboard ephemera. Handbills, announcements, press releases, etc. Mostly undated.
- Box 45 Miscellaneous ephemera generated by organizations other than the Switchboard. Mostly undated.

Series 5: RESTRICTED MATERIALS

- Box 46 Personnel records, including applications to work on Gay Switchboard, with names, addresses, telephone numbers, and questionnaires, 1981-1982.
- Box 47 Correspondence requesting information of a personal nature.
- Box 48 Correspondence between Gay Switchboard and private individuals concerning financial contributions.