



LGBT OLDER ADULTS AND EXCLUSION FROM AGING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

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ISSUE SUMMARY

LGBT older adults often face harassment or hostility when accessing aging programs and when frequenting senior centers, volunteer centers or places of worship. Few aging service providers plan for, or conduct outreach to, the LGBT community—and few are prepared to address acts of discrimination aimed at LGBT elders by staff or other older people. This makes many LGBT older adults reluctant to access mainstream aging services, which increases their social isolation and negatively impacts their physical and mental health.

AGING PROGRAMS OFTEN EXCLUDE LGBT OLDER ADULTS

An elder with strong social networks, opportunities for community engagement, and access to health care and services can generally thrive. However, when elders who live alone lack these support systems, they are at much greater risk for physical and mental impairments. Despite strong connections to families of choice, LGBT older adults report higher rates of social isolation than in the wider population of older adults.¹ A key reason for this isolation is that in addition to being more likely to live alone, LGBT older adults also are more likely to feel unwelcome in health care and community settings. Research shows the harmful effects of social isolation: higher depression, poverty, re-hospitalization, delayed care-seeking, poor nutrition and premature mortality.²

Helping LGBT older adults address and overcome social isolation is central to the broader goal of successful aging for this population. The Older Americans Act funds a variety of services and programs for older adults, including senior centers, social programs, friendly visitor programs, recreational activities, support groups, congregate meals, adult day care, employment and pension counseling, elder abuse prevention and more. However, in many cases, these programs are designed with little to no attention to the needs of LGBT older adults.

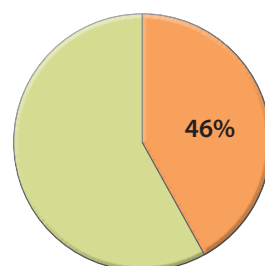
LGBT older adults might be denied services, face harassment from service providers or other elders, or see their specific needs ignored. In a 1994 survey, 46% of Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) ignored.

surveyed said that LGBT people would not be welcome at their senior centers if their sexual orientation were known. Also, 96% did not offer services specifically for gay and lesbian older adults and did not target their outreach to them; and only 17% provided training to staff on issues related to sexual orientation (though 88% were willing to provide such training).

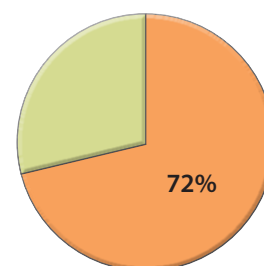
Not surprisingly, in the same study, 72% of 121 gay and lesbian people surveyed said they were tentative about accessing AAA services due to a lack of trust of AAA personnel, and only 19% reported being involved in a senior center (see *Figure 1*). Additionally, LGBT aging service providers hear stories confirming that while some progress has been made in recent years, the circumstances documented in this study are still prevalent. These conditions lead many LGBT older adults to avoid local agencies and, as a result, they miss out on the services and sense of community they provide to other older people.

Figure 1

Area Agencies on Aging:
“LGBT people would not be welcome at our senior centers”



LGBT Elders Tentative About Using AAA Services Due to Lack of Trust



Source: Robert Behney, “The Aging Network’s Response to Gay and Lesbian Issues,” *Outward* newsletter, the Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network of the American Society on Aging, Winter 1994.

¹ Kuyper and Fokkema (2009).

² L. Sederer, “Depression, Social Isolation, and the Urban Elderly,” Conference on Geriatric Mental Health, New York, 2006.



SAGE volunteer Gigi Stoll, right, helps Frank Carter straighten out a wheelchair order during her weekly visit. New York, 2008.

LGBT OLDER ADULTS ARE OFTEN UNWELCOME IN VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Many LGBT older people are powerful advocates for change. Volunteering can help reduce social isolation and provide a sense of purpose for many adults. Further, adults who volunteer regularly have better physical and mental health and a lower risk of mortality.³

The federal government administers three major volunteer programs for older adults. These are: the Retired and Elder Volunteer Services Program (RSVP), which recruits 500,000 older Americans annually for various nonprofit volunteer positions; Foster Grandparents, which employs about 30,000 low-income older adults to work with needy families; and Senior Companions, which assists frail elders. However, each of these programs is based on income eligibility, service scope and time commitment requirements that significantly limit the participation of many older adults.⁴

These programs must reach out to LGBT older adults, who might feel they would not be welcome as volunteers—for example, as a friendly visitor or foster grandparent. In one example of effective outreach, AmeriCorps volunteers in Boston met with and invited older adults from the LGBT Aging Project to participate in the Experience Corps program, which helps children learn to read.

LGBT OLDER ADULTS ARE OFTEN UNWELCOME IN RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES AND OTHER HOUSING SETTINGS

LGBT older adults might be denied housing, including residency in mainstream retirement communities. This discrimination could separate LGBT older adults from loved friends or partners, or push them into homelessness. LGBT older adults might also feel the need to re-enter or stay in the closet in order to obtain or maintain housing.

While there are no assessments of housing discrimination against LGBT older adults, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports that a few state and local studies have shown this sort of bias against the general LGBT people population.⁵ For example, Michigan's Fair Housing Centers found that nearly 30% of same-sex couples were treated differently when attempting to buy or rent a home. SAGE and other LGBT aging organizations report that fears of housing discrimination and unwelcoming communities are commonplace among their constituents. One recent study found that 33% of gay and lesbian respondents thought they would have to hide their sexual identity if they moved to a retirement home.⁶ These fears, combined with the lack of quality elder housing in general, create serious housing concerns for LGBT older adults.

To help address these concerns, in 2009 HUD announced a series of proposals aimed at ensuring that its core housing programs were equally accessible to all who qualify. The proposed rules will clarify that "family" includes LGBT people as eligible beneficiaries of public housing and Housing Choice Voucher programs (which help families rent affordable homes). HUD will also require that grantees and other HUD program participants comply with local and state non-discrimination laws that cover sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Finally, HUD will commission the first-ever national study of discrimination against LGBT people in the rental and sale of housing.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY SOLUTIONS

For a more comprehensive and detailed description of policy solutions, see *Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults*, available at www.lgbtmap.org or www.sageusa.org. Some solution highlights include the following:

- **Pass non-discrimination acts (NDAs) or ordinances at the state or local level.** NDAs that prohibit discrimination in public accommodations and housing can provide legal recourse for LGBT older adults who experience discrimination in a variety of settings, including senior citizen centers, low-income housing, etc. Note that NDAs should prohibit discrimination based on both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (not just sexual orientation).
- **Increase awareness and enforcement of existing NDAs.** Many LGBT older adults and aging service providers are unaware of existing laws; do not know that the law applies to them; or have weak enforcement of these laws. The New York State Attorney General provides an example of an effort to create and distribute written guidance to clarify existing laws.

³ P. Cullinan, "Late-life Civic Engagement Enhances Health for Individuals and Communities," *The Journal on Active Aging*, November–December 2006.

⁴ The Gerontological Society of America, *Civic Engagement in An Older America*, 2005.

⁵ "Obama Administration to Ensure Inclusion of LGBT Community in HUD Programs," HUD press release, October 2009. http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2009/HUDNo.09-206.

⁶ M.J. Johnson, J.K. Arnette, and S.D. Koffman, S.D., "Gay and Lesbian Perceptions of Discrimination in Retirement Care Facilities," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 49(2), 2005.

- **Ensure State Units on Aging (SUAs), Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and mainstream aging providers take the needs of LGBT older adults into account.** The Older Americans Act prioritizes funding for “vulnerable” populations. The Administration on Aging should ensure that SUAs and AAAs understand that LGBT older adults are vulnerable, and that they consider this population in their program planning, development and funding. AAA’s should similarly encourage and support mainstream aging services providers to target, reach out to and include LGBT older adults.
- **Include LGBT older adults in volunteerism, and pass laws or policies to prevent discrimination in volunteer programs.** Pass policies or legislation to ensure federal volunteer programs do not discriminate against LGBT older adults. The Administration on Aging should develop a comprehensive strategy for engaging older individuals to address critical local needs of national concern. AAAs should educate local volunteer organizations on the need to explicitly reach out to and welcome LGBT elder—and help them do so.
- **Add sexual orientation to the non-discrimination provisions of the Federal Fair Housing Act (FHA)** and parallel state policies to render existing housing LGBT-friendly. Include explicit non-discrimination policies and enforcement mechanisms for LGBT people in the FHA, which covers virtually all housing in the U.S. and enumerates protected categories. Link federal and state housing program funding to compliance with these policies.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This is one of a series of issue briefs based on content from *Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults*, a report which provides an in-depth examination of the issues facing LGBT elders, and potential solutions for improving their lives. For more information, visit www.lgbtmap.org or www.sageusa.org.



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