



## LGBT Update January 2010



Kathy McGrath and Ben Labonte, staff of WLEN (Worcester LGBT Elder Network), join the sponsoring agencies to wish all our friends and volunteers best wishes for the New Year. It seems incredible to us that we're on the cusp of 2010. Wasn't it just yesterday that we were all worrying about whether our computer clocks would turn over successfully to 2000?

What a difference a decade makes! The rights and needs of LGBT elders were hardly detectable on the aging community's radar screen 10 years ago. Now, more and more agencies are becoming aware of us and our needs as we age. Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging, Elder Services of Worcester Area, and Worcester Senior Center have been actively engaged in bringing the WLEN network into existence. LGBT Aging Project has lent its invaluable support and expertise. As we launch our effort into 2010, it is indeed a privilege to know that so many of you are behind us in our effort.

### Social Corner

\*WLEN is cosponsoring a Worcester Area Bereavement Group for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender people of all ages. The group is funded by the Mass. Department of Public Health and facilitated by Ethos and the LGBT Aging Project. The bereavement group will meet Tuesday evenings from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. For more information, including the venue, please contact Beth Prullage, LICSW, at (413) 695-2236.

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\*BRUNCH! Saturday, January 16th, at 10:30 AM at Jumpin' Juice and Java in the old Tatnuck Bookseller on Chandler Street, Worcester

This is a re-gifting party AND a Yankee Swap. Please bring a wrapped Re-Gift to our brunch. With all the gifts, we will have a Yankee Swap and a fine time getting together, meeting friends and enjoying a meal with others. **Jumpin' Juice and Java** has breakfast sandwiches, pastries, fancy coffees, and much more.

RSVP: Please email Marty Flint ([martygf@aol.com](mailto:martygf@aol.com)) if you plan to attend.



## Public Policy Issues Affecting LGBT Elders

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) last month jointly released "Outing Age 2010: Public Policy Issues Affecting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Elders." It is an update to the groundbreaking Outing Age report issued in 2000. Like its predecessor, Outing Age 2010 presents an in-depth look at public policy issues and challenges facing millions of aging LGBT people in the United States.

The full text of the 168-page report is available at [http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/outingage\\_final.pdf](http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/outingage_final.pdf).

"For too many years, the needs of the oldest members of our community have been invisible to many of us and ignored by most institutions in our society," says Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "LGBT elders remain a highly vulnerable and largely invisible aging population. We know that invisibility leads to greater social isolation, which can lead to increased vulnerability in many areas. We also know that discrimination across the lifespan leaves LGBT people economically and socially vulnerable as they age. Outing Age 2010 shines a laser beam on these needs and offers concrete recommendations on how aging advocates, policy makers and social service agencies can meet them."



Report findings include:

- Research on LGBT people at the federal and state levels is almost nonexistent, and so the specific needs of LGBT elders remain largely invisible and unaddressed.
- Federal, state and local elder housing and care programs, Area Agencies on Aging, and other providers have no mandate to provide culturally competent services to LGBT people, while elders report widespread fear, discrimination and barriers to care.
- Federal "safety net" programs like Social Security and Medicaid define family and partnership in ways that exclude LGBT families, partners and spouses, creating economic and familial hardships for LGBT elders.
- Significant health disparities persist, with no federal commitment to identifying or addressing them.
- With no federal prohibition against anti-LGBT workplace discrimination, income inequities across the lifespan persist for LGBT wage earners.

Policy recommendations include:

- The federal government and the states must fund and include questions on sexual orientation and gender identity in all research surveys.
- The Administration on Aging should issue guidelines to the states to include LGBT elders as a vulnerable population and provide directives for active outreach to and inclusion of LGBT elders in state plans.
- Federal and state bans on employment discrimination must be established to prevent LGBT elder poverty.
- The definition of family must be expanded to recognize same-sex couples and extended family kinship structures in the designation of federal benefits such as Social Security, Medicaid and Veterans Benefits.
- The Family and Medical Leave Act must be expanded to cover LGBT caregivers and their family and friends, regardless of whether they are related by blood or marriage.
- Public and private health care providers must be trained in cultural competency for working with LGBT older adults.

Outing Age 2010 also notes two key impending areas of focus for LGBT aging advocates: the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act in 2011 and the White House Conference on Aging, slated for 2015.

### "Principles of Care for LGBT Elders"

*Ben Labonte, the WLEN peer worker at Elder Services of Worcester Area, has researched the care of LGBT elders. This month we begin a series of excerpts from his report, "Principles of Care for LGBT Elders."*

## Recognizing the need

### *Providing a Safe Place*

All aging clients deserve to be treated in such a way that they feel safe and secure when dealing with case workers and others involved in their care. This is especially true for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender elders. Members of the LGBT aging population, like any other subgroup of older adults, need to be treated with respect and acceptance to feel safe. This means that the people they come in contact with in the course of receiving services should be sensitive to LGBT culture, especially as it has been experienced by the older generation of LGBT people. In addition, the culture of the agencies and providers must at least be welcoming to all kinds of people and preferably be culturally competent to serve LGBT elders.

#### **Action plan:**

**Evaluate the willingness and readiness to serve the LGBT aging population on the part of your agency, its administrators, employees, volunteers and contractors.**[\[i\]](#)

## Understanding the Culture

## ***Defining events***

Three events in the last 40 years have helped to define the LGBT community. They are the Stonewall riots in 1969, the AIDS crisis that exploded in the gay male community beginning in 1981, and the gay marriage movement, which has resulted in same-sex marriage being legal in five states as of January 1, 2010. All three movements played out against the background of the women's liberation movement, which highlighted the misogynist dimensions of gay-bashing, and the sexual revolution, which freed sexuality from much of its previous taboo status.

Stonewall began a movement that told LGBT people that they could be proud of who they were. The AIDS crisis mobilized the community to fight for the right to decent health care and funding of AIDS prevention efforts. Mobilization around the AIDS crisis taught the community how to organize itself politically. The gay marriage movement opened to LGBT people public recognition of their relationships and limited legal rights. Stonewall allowed people to come out of the closet. HIV/AIDS, while still a serious disease, is no longer the immediate death sentence it once was. Gay marriage has recognized LGBT family life. Despite setbacks like "Don't Ask Don't Tell" in the military, the Defense of Marriage Act's impact on federal benefits, and anti-gay constitutional amendments in many states, life as an LGBT person in this country has improved dramatically from when members of the current elderly population were young adults.

## ***Social Network***

Competency begins with understanding and accepting the social network that the older gay client is part of, including her or his immediate support system. This may include members of a family of origin or of a family of choice or some combination of both.<sup>[iii]</sup> Many LGBT elders have been estranged from their birth families because of rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. A gay person's legal "next of kin" is often not the person who is closest to him or her. An LGBT elder's long-term partnership may not be recognized by blood relatives for what it is or was.<sup>[iiii]</sup> LGBT elders may have outlived most of their friends, especially in the gay male community, which lost so many members to the HIV/AIDS virus. Isolation is a problem for many LGBT elders, because of rejection and, in some cases, outright discrimination.

Today's elders came of age before the 1969 Stonewall demonstrations in New York City, usually cited as the beginning of the gay rights movement. Of necessity, they had to cultivate a discreet gay identity which was known only to close friends. Their families may not know they are gay, or if they do it is not discussed in public, often by mutual consent. Partners may have been accepted and identified as friends and not as lovers or partners. It is important that case workers and other providers affirm these elaborate relationships without judgment.<sup>[iv]</sup>

While some older LGBT couples have married now that it is legal in Massachusetts and elsewhere, many have not. Many LGBT elders in long-term partnerships have felt excluded by a hetero-centric society and don't want to avail themselves of what they consider a strictly heterosexual institution. In any case, married LGBT couples are excluded from their spouses' Social Security benefits and other federal benefits because of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

### **Action plan:**

**Enhance your organization's sensitivity to the LGBT elder population through cultural competency training for staff and administrators.**

### **Next month: Barriers to service**

[i] For a simple tool, see Crisp, Catherine, S. Wayland and T. Gordon. (2002) Appendix to Gay affirmative practice scale (GAP): a new measure for assessing cultural competence with gay and lesbian clients. *Social Work* 51:2 115-126 The two-page questionnaire is "designed to measure clinicians' beliefs about treatment with gay and lesbian clients and their behaviors in clinical settings with these clients."

[ii] Brotman, Shari, Bill Ryan and Robert Cormier. (2003). "The health and social service needs of LGBT seniors and their families in Canada" in *The Gerontologist* 43:192-202. Online at <http://gerontologist.gerontologyjournals.org/cgi/content/full/43/2/192#SEC3>

[iii] Crisp, Catherine, Sherrill Wayland and Theresa Gordon. (2008) "Older gay, lesbian and bisexual adults: tools for age competent and gay-appropriate practice," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* (The Howarth Press) 20:1/2 7-8. Online at <http://jglss.haworthpress.com>.

[iv] Brotman (2003)

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