

Enhancing health, wellness and community

for older LGBT adults



A unique intergenerational complex in California and an expanded seniors center in an LGBT-welcoming development in New York are among the initiatives now underway to combat feelings of loneliness and exclusion and to boost connectedness

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

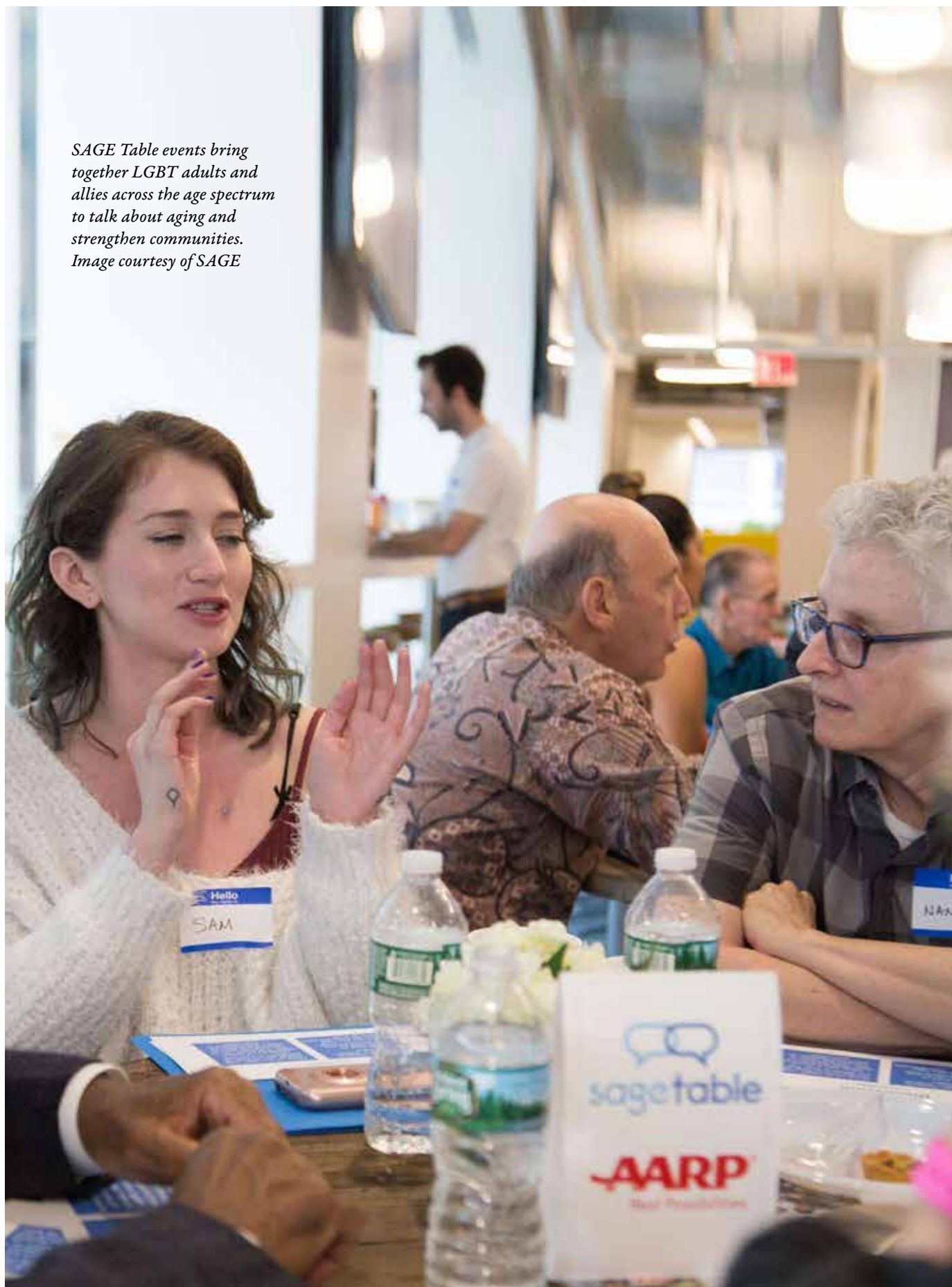
About 2.4 million adults 65 and older currently identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT)¹ in the United States, and that population is expected to grow significantly in coming years, along with the entire older-adult population. Other nations will likewise see increased numbers of older LGBT adults as the Boomers age. While these individuals face the same issues as many others who are aging—social isolation, loneliness, housing affordability, and ageism—research shows they have additional concerns that can take a toll on health and wellness.

The Williams Institute, a University of California, Los Angeles School of Law think tank, researches sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy. In 2016, a comprehensive review² of the scientific literature by the Institute found the following:

- Older lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men have higher prevalences of mental health problems, disability and disease, and physical limitations than older heterosexual people.
- Transgender older adults are also at higher risk for poor physical health, disability, and depressive symptoms.
- Resilient LGBT older adults may find support through chosen families and informal support networks such as LGBT community organizations and gay-affirmative religious networks.
- Effective, culturally sensitive training for service providers could help improve the experience of LGBT older

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SAGE Table events bring together LGBT adults and allies across the age spectrum to talk about aging and strengthen communities. Image courtesy of SAGE



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adults with their healthcare providers, alleviating expectations of discrimination that cause delay in seeking care.

(Also see the sidebar, “LGBT older adults face unique challenges: research,” on page 49.)

“LGBT and Dementia,”³ an issues brief developed by the Alzheimer’s Association and LGBT national nonprofit SAGE and released in August 2018, outlines the difficulties faced by the one in 13 LGBT older adults living with dementia and their caregivers. To help deal with this growing challenge, the brief suggests that organizations and service providers expand their definition of family, educate staff on LGBT cultural competency, and find or create support groups for LGBT individuals.

Additional recent research documents some key concerns of LGBT adults as they grow older, pointing to steps organizations can take to help. A March 2018 AARP Research report, “Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans,”⁴ found that 75% of LGBT respondents said they are concerned about having enough support from family and friends as they age; worry about how they will be treated in long-term care; and want specific LGBT services for older adults.

According to the survey, respondents said they would feel more comfortable with providers who:

- are specifically trained in LGBT patient needs (88%)
- use advertising to highlight LGBT-friendly services (86%)

- have some staff members who are LGBT themselves (85%)
- display LGBT-welcoming signs or symbols in facilities and online (82%)

(For further information, view the AARP infographic on page 41 and the sidebar, “Community needs of LGBT older adults,” on this page.)

Financial issues also loom large for this population, according to Kelly Kent, SAGE’s National Housing Initiative director. “LGBT older adults not only have higher rates of poverty compared to heterosexual married couples,” Kent says, “but lesbian older adults in particular are 10–20% less likely than different-sex couples to have retirement income, interest and dividend income, and other financial resources.” (More details ap-

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Community needs of older LGBT adults

In March 2018, AARP Research released a report, “Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans,” based on data from 1,762 individuals collected from October 27 to November 12, 2017 (a related infographic appears on page 41). The survey found that just under one-third of LGBT respondents lived in large cities, while the rest lived in medium-sized cities, suburbs, towns and rural areas. Yet 83% said they live in at least a somewhat LGBT-friendly community, with responses suggesting that community size is less important than LGBT-friendliness.

Nevertheless, the share of residents with access to LGBT community resources is significantly higher in bigger cities compared to smaller

cities or towns and more rural areas. And health and senior services continue to lag everywhere: Among respondents, 48% of big-city residents and as few as 10% of rural and small-town residents said they have access to LGBT senior services in their community.

Respondents also expressed concerns about neglect (67%); abuse (62%); verbal or physical harassment (61%); and refused or limited access to services (61%) if they or their spouse need in-home assistance, assisted living or nursing care.

Older LGBT community members are also parents and grandparents and could benefit from information and services designed for them, according to the survey. Among respondents, 59% of bisexual men and women, 53% of gender-expansive individuals, 43%

of lesbian women, and 19% of gay men said they have children or grandchildren. [Ed. The term *gender-expansive* describes a person’s gender identity and/or its expression as beyond culturally defined norms for that gender.]

Notably, respondents are optimistic about the future for the LGBT community, with most agreeing with the statement, “The kinds of problems people face because they are LGBT will largely be solved in the next 20 to 30 years.”

Adapted from Houghton, A. (2018, March). Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans (report and infographic). Washington, DC: AARP Research. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00217.001>

Maintaining Dignity

Understanding & Responding to the Needs of Older LGBT Americans

How Optimistic?

Strongly Somewhat Not Not sure

50%



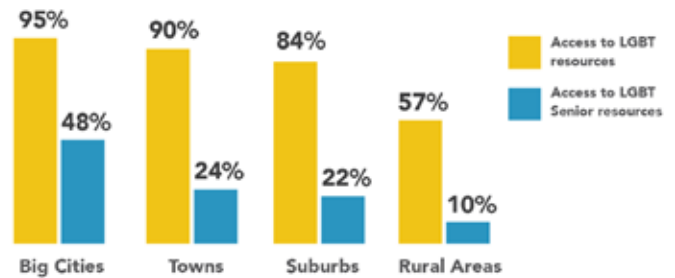
of older LGBT adults are just somewhat optimistic that problems they face today will be solved in the next 20 to 30 years.



76%

are concerned about having adequate family and/or social supports to rely on as they age.

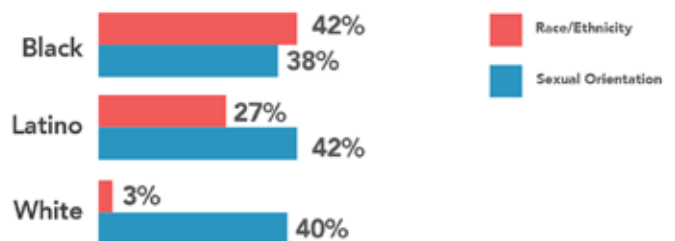
Older LGBT adults live in communities of all sizes, but access to LGBT services varies.



34%

of LGBT adults are concerned that they will have to hide their identity in order to have access to suitable housing as they age.

Black & Latino LGBT adults have compound discrimination concerns about the quality of their healthcare as they age.



LGBT Concerns About Long Term Care

67% neglect

61% limited access to services

60% verbal or physical harassment

52% will be forced to hide/deny identity

LGBT Adults Want Welcoming Long-Term Care Services Designed for Them

88% want LGBT trained providers

86% want advertising for LGBT friendly services

85% want providers that are also LGBT

82% want LGBT signs displayed onsite

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The Los Angeles LGBT Center is building the Anita May Rosenstein Campus, a two-acre complex with ground-level retail space, housing, and youth and seniors centers. An artist rendering captures the intergenerational campus. Image courtesy of Los Angeles LGBT Center

pear in the sidebar, “Preparing for retirement: Key LGBT findings,” on page 47.)

Organizations dedicated to older-adult quality of life can support the vulnerable—and growing—LGBT aging population with inviting programs, supportive services and staff, and welcoming, safe places to live. Two recent initiatives that combine affordable housing with socialization and accessible services will help provide solutions.

Communities of support

Crotona Senior Residences broke ground in the Bronx, New York City, on May 17, 2018. A collaboration between SAGE and HELP USA, a national nonprofit developer of affordable and supportive housing, the USD\$41.5-million LGBT-friendly affordable housing development will provide 84 apartments, with 26 units reserved for older adults who have been homeless. The seven-story building will feature energy-efficient construction, including windows, fixtures and an integrated solar panel

array, as well as a rooftop terrace and community garden. Each floor will have a lounge for socializing. Importantly, the current Bronx SAGE seniors center will move to the new building, where it will occupy the entire first floor.

“We anticipate a much larger population than the 250 registered older adults whom we currently serve, which will give us an opportunity to expand our staff and programming,” says Steven Wilkinson, director of SAGE Centers. “We’ll also have a new cyber center where we can do technology training, which is critical. Many of our members want to get up to speed with the Internet, especially Internet banking and having the ability to check their balances. Many also have smartphones now, and classes can help them with that, as well.” (To learn more about the Bronx SAGE Center and how it meets the needs of LGBT older adults as well as members of the community, see page 43 for the sidebar, “Expanding support in the Bronx, New York.”)

On a considerably more ambitious scale, the Los Angeles LGBT Center recently broke ground on its Anita May Rosenstein Campus, a unique complex in Hollywood that will offer intergenerational housing and services, including 98 affordable-housing units for older adults, 100 beds for homeless young people, and a large array of services and programming. The two-acre complex will span more than a city block and connect with the Center’s arts, cultural and educational building, The Village at Ed Gould Plaza, located across the street.

The Center already operates Triangle Square, an affordable housing complex that provides 104 private apartment homes for low-income LGBT adults ages 62 and over, with more than 500 people on the waiting list. From Triangle Square, the Center’s staff learned that older LGBT adults want to be around people of all ages. This realization was a motivating factor in developing the new campus.

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Expanding support in the Bronx, New York

SAGE launched the National LGBT Elder Housing Initiative in 2015 to address the challenges and concerns of the older LGBT population in areas related to housing. The organization is working with partners, including national nonprofit developer HELP USA, to develop welcoming, affordable supportive residences for individuals ages 62 and older. As part of the initiative, SAGE also provides LGBT cultural competency training to seniors housing and services providers, educates consumers about their housing rights, advocates against housing discrimination (which 48% of same-sex older couples have experienced, according to SAGE), and assists builders in replicating inclusive housing.

Crotona Senior Residences is the initiative's most recent development. Under construction in the Tremont area of the Bronx, New York City, the new affordable housing development will open in summer 2019. "[The Residences] will provide crucial housing and supportive services to the many older LGBT New Yorkers who are in desperate need of an affordable place to live," SAGE CEO Michael Adams said at the development's May 2018 groundbreaking.

The advent of the Crotona will also enable a significant expansion of the existing Bronx SAGE seniors center, comments Steven Wilkinson, director of SAGE Centers. While the current center serves about 250 older adults Monday through Friday, the

numbers in Crotona are expected to be far greater.

The existing Bronx SAGE Center offers a wide range of health and wellness programs, running the gamut from education about specific health issues to nutrition information and counseling. "All programs are geared to older adults, first and foremost, regardless of sexual orientation," Wilkinson notes. "Our members are an absolute mix. There are allies and LGBT folks, as well. We ask their orientation when they register, but even in this day and age, people won't necessarily answer that question. Nevertheless, we know there's both."

For the most part, the programs are similar to what would be part of the schedule in any seniors center: In addition to health and nutrition information, there are exercise and movement classes, art creation and appreciation, computer classes on a small scale, social events, movies and discussions, and skill-building workshops.

"The things you would probably also see at other seniors centers, such as a Zumba class or karaoke, probably will have a little different flair at our center," Wilkinson says. "They may be more 'camp' or fun—but generally they're part of the whole seniors center genre." Also offered is LGBT-specific programming, such as a Latino gay men's group or a lesbian book club group, where reading and discussions center on LGBT issues.

"All programming surrounds the availability of a nutritionally sound meal provided by the New York

City Department for the Aging," Wilkinson adds. While the current center offers lunch, other centers—and possibly the new center—may offer breakfast or dinner, depending upon the needs and desires of the participants.

Most importantly, "it's helpful for participants to know that the Bronx SAGE Center is an environment where if they're in the 'Art from the Heart' group, for example, they can talk about their husband or wife or partner who passed if they want to; they don't need to feel they have to keep it in or worry how it will be received," Wilkinson says. "They can be their authentic selves, and can share what everyone else shares in these situations—'Oh, that reminds me of my wife,' or 'That reminds me of when we got married.' You have to feel a certain amount of safety to do that," he observes. "We hope this environment helps create a community where people also get together on the weekend, outside of the center, to cut down on some of the isolation."

Reference

SAGE. (n.d.). We're making sure there's a place for you. Retrieved August 26, 2018, at <https://www.sageusa.org/what-we-do/national-lgbt-housing-initiative>.

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An artist rendering shows the seven-story Crotona Senior Residences, which is currently under construction in the Bronx, New York City. The LGBT-friendly affordable housing development is a collaboration between nonprofits SAGE and HELP USA. Image courtesy of SAGE

New model, new opportunities

“There are an estimated 65,000 LGBT people over the age of 65 who live in Los Angeles, 68% of whom live alone,” states Los Angeles LGBT Center CEO Lorri L. Jean. The Anita May Rosenstein Campus is 10 years in the making, starting in 2008 when the Center’s board first approved the campus’s long-term strategic plan. Multiple issues had to be dealt with at the state and federal levels that affected funding and the pace at which the plans moved forward, according to Jean. The campus, including an expanded seniors center, is scheduled to open in April 2019.

The new campus will house the Center’s new administrative headquarters, freeing the building that currently houses it to become a health and medical center that will help meet the growing demand for such services. Once the administra-

tive offices move, its Health Services will expand its HIV/AIDS specialty care, including testing and prevention; primary medical care; targeted programs for bisexual and lesbian women, as well as transgender individuals; mental health services; addiction recovery services; a pharmacy; and a research area.

“From the outset, our goal was to build an intergenerational campus that would provide desperately needed affordable housing for both youth and older adults, with all of the services that both groups need,” Jean notes. “Although younger and older people are at completely different stages of their lives, their life experiences are such that they can help each other and teach each other. There’s a huge incentive, for the older adults in particular, to come out of their apartments and take advantage of everything available to them.”

According to Director of Senior Services Kiera Pollock, LCSW, the Center knows the new campus will have “joint programs around wellness, whether it’s yoga or art activities or health education. We also are building in the opportunity for youth to mentor our seniors around technology, specifically,” Pollock shares.

The Center’s current senior services program has about 4,300 registered older adults, and encompasses 160 wellness, education and support activities monthly. In addition, it offers a large variety of cultural events and activities, as well as performance opportunities for the many participants who have worked in the arts. Its *Vanguard* blog highlights events that included the 20th annual “senior prom,” during which LGBT older adults danced to disco music at Pickwick Gardens, an event venue in Burbank.

“We organize this because many of our seniors did not have an opportunity to go to a prom with the partner of their choosing, or didn’t go at all,” Pollock explains. “So, we host an amazing dance every year where they feel safe to be together in public with their dates and, again, feel part of the community in a way that’s important to them.”

Another initiative helps older veterans who often are not receiving benefits because they were dishonorably discharged for being LGBT. Or, they came out in older adulthood and felt like they shouldn’t try to get benefits because of the current military stance on this issue. The Center’s program “specifically works with these veterans, assisting them in getting benefits from the Veterans Administration, helping them apply for additional supports and getting comprehensive case management,” Pollock says.

The Center also provides support groups and other programs specific to older LGBT veterans, in which about 500 Los Angeles veterans currently participate. The organization seeks to partner with other groups to help provide similar services outside the area, Pollock mentions, because the need is growing. [Ed. Interested organizations can contact Kiera Pollock by email at seniors@lalgbtcenter.org.]

The new campus will offer all of the Center’s current services and programs, and more. For example, Pollock and her colleagues are also looking at ways to provide intergenerational employment and workforce training. “We already have this kind of training in our youth program, but we know that many of our seniors have been underpaid throughout their careers and would like to engage in part- or full-time work. We’re looking at whether we can offer résumé development and interview skills to help youth

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Preparing for retirement: Key LGBT findings

Aegon Center for Longevity and Retirement, headquartered in The Netherlands, recently conducted its first international survey on retirement aspiration and planning in the LGBT community. The survey included 900 workers and retired adults from Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Key findings of the report “LGBT: Retirement Preparations Amid Social Progress” include the following:

- Forty percent of LGBT individuals are single compared to 22% of heterosexuals.
- Thirty-seven percent have dependent children compared to 43% of heterosexuals.
- Forty-five percent expect to spend time with their family and friends when they retire compared to 56% of heterosexuals.
- Twenty-two percent of LGBT workers think that in their own retirement, they will need to provide financial support to their aging parents; that compares to 15% of heterosexuals.
- LGBT workers may still face open and subtle discrimination that denies them the same opportunities in the workplace as heterosexuals.
- Across the nine countries surveyed, median earnings for

LGBT households are around 8% less per year than heterosexual households.

- The gap is even wider among LGBT women, who have a household income that is 17% less than that of heterosexual women and 27% less than heterosexual men.
- LGBT workers lag behind their heterosexual peers in terms of the percentage who say that they are always saving for retirement (37% compared to 41%).
- On a positive note, LGBT workers are more likely than heterosexual workers to have formulated a retirement plan in writing (20% compared to 16%).
- Fifty-five percent of retired LGBT adults retired sooner than they planned, compared to 45% of heterosexuals; the most important reason for doing so was ill-health (39% of LGBT retirees compared to 32% of heterosexual retirees).

Aegon prepared its report in collaboration with Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies (United States), and Instituto de Longevidade Mongeral Aegon (Brazil). For the full publication, go to https://www.transamericacenter.org/docs/default-source/global-survey-2017/tcrs2018_sr_lgbt_retirement_preparations.pdf.

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and seniors across the spectrum in that way,” she explains.

“Creating a large-scale intergenerational campus is critically important,” Pollock adds. “When I talk with seniors, most of them want to be in multigenerational housing and centers. They love the idea of being around and connecting with people of all ages.” She tells of talking to an individual who said to her, “You’re asking me a lot about different program things. But it’s not about programs for seniors. I want to be with our community as a whole, to feel integrated into it across ages, and to be able to have those connections and conversations.” Says Pollock, “They all feel that way. [Those connections] make them feel more positive and less lonely.”

‘A grand experiment’

The Los Angeles LGBT Center will welcome collaborations with researchers to assess outcomes of the intergenerational initiative, says CEO Lorri L. Jean. “I would love to see this happen because this really is a grand experiment. We looked all over the world to see if we could find any organization with a campus like this, and we could not find one. So, I think it would be great to have this studied to see what kind of difference it makes.”

Jean recalls that when the Center started thinking about the project, “it almost seemed impossible. There was no model for it,” she observes, “and paying for it was so far and away beyond anything

we had ever done. But we took a leap of faith. And now it is happening, despite all the bumps in the road that we’ve experienced.”

In Jean’s view, “there’s something about setting your sights on an inspiring grand vision that brings others along with you. It sounds a little hokey,” she admits, “but it’s almost like the universe said ‘Let’s do this and make it happen.’ Our board, staff leadership and donors have been there right along with us, as have our local elected officials.” Jean concludes, “So, when it comes to starting something new and meaningful—even life changing—I would encourage everyone to dream big and not take no for an answer.”

Resources

Internet

American Psychological Association: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Aging

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/aging.aspx>

HELP USA

<http://www.helpusa.org>

Los Angeles LGBT Center

<https://lalgbtcenter.org>

Los Angeles LGBT Center’s Vanguard blog

<https://vanguardnow.org>

SAGE

<https://sageusa.org>

SAGE Center Bronx

<https://sagenyc.org/nyc/centers/bronx-programs.cfm>

University of California, Los Angeles School of Law: The

Williams Institute

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>

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LGBT older adults face unique challenges: research

A comprehensive research review by the Williams Institute, a University of California, Los Angeles School of Law think tank that researches sexual orientation and gender identity, documented the unique challenges LGBT older adults face as follows:

Social disparities, including:

- need to conceal sexual and gender identity from health providers and social service professionals for fear of discrimination
- fewer options for informal care, including relying for support on "families of choice" (families made up of close friends), LGBT community organizations, and affirmative religious groups
- financial instability and discriminatory access to legal and social programs traditionally established to support aging adults
- discrimination due to sexual orientation and gender identity that may lead to physical and verbal abuse, as well as unfavorable treatment when seeking retirement homes, including less housing

availability and higher pricing compared to non-LGBT older adults

Health disparities, including:

- worse mental and physical health, higher rates of disease and physical limitations
- higher prevalence of engaging in risky health behavior such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviors
- worse overall mental and physical health, disability and poorer health outcomes, and a higher likelihood of experiencing stressors and barriers to care for HIV-positive, compared with HIV-negative, LGBT older adults

Adapted from Choi, S. K., & Meyer, I. H. (2016). LGBT Aging: A Review of Research Findings, Needs, and Policy Implications. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, University of California, Los Angeles Law School. The report was made possible with support from SAGE.



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