

LGBT FRIENDLY SERVICES...JUST THE BASICS

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For many, aging can present numerous challenges, including the ability to maintain good health. But for the nation's estimated 3 million LGBT older adults, growing older may also mean facing very difficult choices, such as choosing to go back into the closet. The pre-Stonewall generation has been referred to as "Gen Silent," reflecting their tendency to be "closeted" and their hesitancy to advocate on their own behalf. For many, it was impossible to be openly gay and feel safe. Now at a time in their life when they require services and programs offered by aging service providers, maybe within a long-term care setting, an adult day care center, or a senior center, many LGBT older adults report heightened fear and anxiety should they disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Moreover, silence greatly increases a LGBT older adult's risk of social isolation and, as a result, decreases their likelihood of successful aging.

Some people may think that being "out" (disclosing your sexual orientation and/or gender identity) to aging service providers or healthcare practitioners is not important, or they may not see the benefits of accessing aging services that are inclusive and culturally competent. Consequently, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, LGBT seniors are five times less likely to use aging related services than their heterosexual peers as a result of fear, but have a far greater need for those services. Additionally, a 2007 study, Improving the Lives of Older Adults, found that a majority of the nearly 650 LGBT people studied reported being abused or neglected by staff, or isolated and/or discriminated against by other residents. Finally, in 2013, the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) released results from a state-funded survey on the health needs of local LGBT older adults. Among the findings, nearly 40 percent of participants reported at least one discriminatory experience in healthcare setting in their lifetime, which included 13 percent who were denied access to healthcare and 22

percent who said they had to hide their identity from a provider. About 11 percent said they experienced abusive language from a provider.

Knowing someone's sexual orientation is different from knowing about that person's sex life. Sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity, are an integral part of everyone's identity, LGBT or straight. Therefore, if a provider doesn't really know their clients/patients, how can they ensure the person's needs are being addressed and receiving appropriate services?

Tips for providing care to LGBT older adults:

*Revise websites, brochures, waiting rooms, and forms to be inclusive and welcoming to LGBT older adults. Involve all team members and office staff in changes. Ideally, these "cultural" changes need to be implemented and supported by top level decision makers.

*Work to build trust and gain credibility by improving communication and becoming informed about unique strengths, stressors, and legal challenges in the lives of LGBT older adults.

*Seek LGBT health resources for best practice guidelines and to guide clinical/psychosocial decisions.

*Recognize diversity among LGBT older adults. LGBT individuals are a diverse group, including age, race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, and geographical region.

Tips for LGBT older adults to find LGBT friendly services:

*Ask around. Talk to your friends, family members, and co-workers. Ask them who their doctors are or where they receive services.

*Call your local LGBT community center (ie, William Way). Many times centers will have referral lists for LGBT friendly services, including medical and legal resources.

*Call and ask questions. Find out if this provider currently serves LGBT older adults. Do they seem at ease with your questions? Have staff received training about the unique needs of LGBT older adults?

*Explore the website. Is inclusive language used? Are there pictures of same-sex couples? Transgender individuals? Do you see signs/symbols reflective of LGBT culture and history?

*Visit the office. What is the atmosphere? Are there LGBT materials in the waiting room, symbols or literature? Non-discrimination policies posted? Do the forms you fill out use words like "partner"?

Advocacy groups for successful aging, such as the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging (www.lgbtagingcenter.org) and Boulder County Area Agency on Aging's Project Visibility (www.bouldercounty.org/family/seniors/pages/projvis.aspx) offer care providers training, education, and resources for providing welcoming services for LGBT older adults. These training programs are designed to ensure that aging service organizations can professionally, sensitively, effectively and appropriately serve our communities.

Additionally, advocacy groups work to provide resources directly to LGBT older adults so they have the information they need to find services and programs that are supportive and responsive to their needs.

Initiatives like these, which work with both the providers and older adults themselves, are the beginning of the process of assuring culturally competent care and providing the same opportunities as their heterosexual peers have to age in a safe and supportive environment.

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