

CeCChaplin by MeMo

Recent analyses suggest that there are at least 1.5 million lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans over the age of 60. These numbers are based on an estimate from UCLA's Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and the Law which has calculated that approximately 3.8 percent of Americans identify as LGBT.

LGBT elders deal with significant economic and health disparities as compared with heterosexual seniors. According to a 2011 national health study co-authored by the Center for American Progress and Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders (SAGE), more than half of LGBT respondents have been told by a doctor that they have depression; 39 percent have seriously contemplated suicide; and 53 percent feel isolated from others. Social isolation remains a major issue as LGBT seniors are 3-4 times less likely to have children, twice as likely to live alone, and twice as likely to be single.

According to a 2010 MetLife Study of Boomers from the MetLife Mature Market Institute, about 42% of the LGBT population identified their relationship status as single, far higher than the 27% of the general population. Like Margueritte Wilkins, many LGBT seniors may also be estranged from their biological families.

"This generation came of age when homosexuality was considered criminal, a form of mental illness, or a security risk," says Brian De Vries, a professding

Brian De Vries of San Francisco State University says these stories are all too common. In a 2014 study co-authored by De Vries, of 400 midlife and older gay men and lesbians surveyed, about one-third maintained some fear of openly disclosing their sexual orientation. A 2010 Williams Institute study reported that, compared to LGBT persons under the age of 30, those between the ages of 30 and 54 were at least 16 times more likely to be “closeted” and those over the age of 55 are 83 times more likely to be “closeted.”

“LGBT individuals turned away from formal services because in part, they were turned away” says De Vries. This experience makes asking for help even more challenging as they age. Despite some advances and greater awareness of LGBT issues, De Vries, who is currently doing extensive research in Palm Springs and San Francisco, says his investigation finds that things aren’t necessarily improving across the board. “We hear particularly from older transgender people, horrible stories of how they’ve been treated by service providers.”

So how do you bring people back into the fold?

“Outreach is a big part of this work,” says Doreen Bermudez of SAGE. “We identify places where we can come in and talk to staff and members...we are able to make connections to the aging network. We invite potential participants to a complimentary day just for them to test it out.” says Doreen Bermudez of SAGE. But it’s not without its challenges. Deborah Messina, Vice President of Strategic Planning and Business

anyone for anything. There's nothing I need from any anything except for love and respect..." De Vries says this scene exemplifies a trait held by many LGBT seniors. "There is this crisis competence. By being alone, these seniors have developed strength and resilience and they're bringing that into their later years."

End of Life and AIDS

This doesn't just apply to gay people. De Vries says that more and more people are aging outside of traditional structures, without children and without partners. "People are not going to age in the way their parents did — they are going to expect different sorts of things" he says.

As a gay man, De Vries is particularly invested in changing the way his community approaches end of life. "Heterosexuals in traditional family settings have others who will raise this issue whether they like it or not," says De Vries. "But here we are as gay men or lesbians with people we have chosen as our family... so how can we introduce this discussion in those settings so we can be better prepared?"

To add more complexity, sometimes that chosen family may not be readily available. "AIDS has become salient once again in a way it hasn't been for years," according to De Vries. "Especially when it comes to older gay men...aging can be re-traumatizing. Again they are acutely aware of the people that they have lost...people that they would have otherwise called for care."

SAGEDay is painfully aware of this reality and seeks to include these conversations in their daily meetings. In addition to social activities, weekly yoga and tai chi, cultural programming is a central part of the program. "We create connections within LGBT history," says Doreen Bermudez of SAGE. "We ask participants to reflect on their experience in the past... in order to be able to acknowledge their place in the community."

SAGEDay, a Medicaid-eligible program, has been funded for 18 months through a 1.1 million dollar state grant. The idea is to "establish a social model adult day care and provide training and outreach to members of the managed long-term care community," says Deborah Messina of the Hebrew Home. "It's my hope that this type of sensitivity training is just for now — and that we won't need this forever."

Please follow our [community rules](#) when engaging in comment discussion on this site.