

COMMUNITY

# Affirmative Aging

Awareness and advocacy are growing for elderly LGBT adults

By AMANDA WALDROUPE

Portland's Second Annual Gay and Grey conference is part of a budding movement in the Portland metropolitan area to create services and resources for an ever-growing population of elderly lesbian, gay, bi and trans adults.

Gay and Grey, taking place this year on May 22, was founded in 2009 by advocates for elderly LGBT adults. The one-day conference provides free health consultations, fitness evaluations and panels discussing topics on gay-friendly senior housing options and other issues. Last year's event attracted approximately 150 people. Organizers are optimistic the number will double this year.

They also hope the resource fair will make it less daunting for elderly LGBT adults to access services that ultimately make aging a little easier.

An elderly LGBT population is only recently emerging in society. According to the 2008 American Community Survey, there are 109,194 elderly people over the age of 60 living in the Portland metro area, or 15 percent of the population. No concrete data estimating the number of LGBT elders in the area exists, though advocates typically use a ballpark figure of 10 percent, which translates to 10,000 LGBT elderly adults in the Portland area.

"This generation of GLBTQI seniors is a generation that broke barriers for the rest of us that came after," says Vaune Albanese, the executive director of Friendly House, a social service agency that is sponsoring Gay and Grey. "As they have been in the past, they are our pioneers."

A lack of education and awareness about the population exists among service providers. For that reason, advocates say elderly LGBT adults face increased discrimination, marginalization, and the fear of possibly being recloseted as they age.

"This population...needs advocacy and community to rally around," Albanese says.

Mya Chamberlin is Friendly House's director of safety net services, including the Elder Resource Alliance (ERA), a program for LGBT seniors that Friendly House incorporated into its offerings in February. She says elder adults frequently report lack of support when accessing services.

"When they have to transition to a higher level of care or bring in in-home services, they were forced back into the closet," Chamberlin says. "We just encounter people who won't access services for fear."

Aging gay adults are afraid that divulging their sexual orientation or gender iden-

tity will result in their services being cut. "Whether the danger is real or perceived, the fear is real," Albanese says.

Elderly LGBT adults are uncomfortable sharing their sexual orientation and gender identity with medical providers. Paul Iarrobino, a program supervisor in Multnomah County's department of Aging and Disability Services, says this anxiety compromises

a sexual reassignment surgery, or raise questions about why an individual is living with someone of the same sex. "They don't always see a senior center as a friendly place," Iarrobino says.

Elderly LGBT adults also face financial difficulties not necessarily experienced by elder heterosexual people. Survivor benefits from Social Security are not paid to same-sex partners, and aging adults may not have children or other family to provide care.

"There are all kinds of financial inequities," says Laurie Young, public policy director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a national political advocacy organization. "The opportunity to prepare for retirement is much more compromised. That makes aging well a real challenge for LGBT people."

A partial reason why aging LGBT citizens face discrimination from their peers is generational, Albanese says. Elder generations that grew up during the Great Depression may not necessarily understand why one group of people should receive additional services. Maria Micozzi-Jones, the chair of Gay and Grey's planning committee, says part of it is homophobia. "The biases are much greater among the cohorts they are living with," Micozzi-Jones says.

Another reason why aging can be agonizing for LGBT adults is because of the general prejudice society has toward the process. "Aging is not valued in our culture, especially in the gay men's community," Iarrobino adds.

Micozzi-Jones says the challenges LGBT seniors face when accessing health and housing services leave them feeling isolated. Her goal for Gay and Grey is that seniors will learn in detail what services are available to them, and feel empowered to seek them out.

"It's going to be a great learning experience," says Iarrobino.

Albanese hopes that Gay and Grey will not be an isolated event. "What we're hoping is to create a movement toward creating access and gay-friendly housing in metropolitan Portland," he says.

Friendly House, by incorporating ERA into its programs, now offers a continuity of services for LGBT elder adults. ERA and fellow advocates are providing training to senior service staff. An increased amount of education and awareness, they say, will enable staff and facilities to be more sensitive and culturally competent.

Providence ElderPlace offers health care,



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GAY AND GREY PDX FAN PAGE / FACEBOOK

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FOR THE NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN  
TASK FORCE

elderly adults' health because it prevents discussions about sexual health, HIV risk, hormone therapy and other risk factors.

"They often don't seek out information in the traditional settings," Iarrobino says, or seek information out at all.

Paperwork seniors are required to complete for healthcare and housing services does not list domestic partnership as a marital status option. Choices given for gender are still binary, and they do not ask one's sexual orientation.

Senior centers can be a problematic environment for elderly LGBT adults. Receiving baths or other cleaning in the form of hospice care could reveal the senior had

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