



**City Council Testimony – Aging Committee
Oversight Hearing – Social Isolation
January 26, 2012**

Chair Lappin and members of the Aging committee: My name is Suzy Ritholz, Ph.D., LCSW-R, I am the Director of Social Services for SAGE, Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders. SAGE is the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults. In New York City, SAGE has provided comprehensive social services and community building programs for LGBT older adults for more than 30 years. Thank you for holding this hearing on social isolation among older adults in New York City.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults make up a significant and growing share of both the overall LGBT population and the broader 65+ population. As with the population of all older adults, the numbers of LGBT elders are expected to double in size over the next several decades. Estimates suggest that this number will reach about 3 million nationally by 2030.

New York City is now witnessing this surge in the LGBT elder population and the growing need for LGBT-sensitive supports. LGBT communities are a vital component of New York City life and culture, yet LGBT older adults are more at risk for social isolation than their heterosexual counterparts. LGBT elders are twice as likely to live alone as heterosexual older adults and more than four times as likely to have no children, meaning that the caregiving support structure we assume is in place for older adults might not be there for many LGBT older people. The estimated 100,000 LGBT elders living in New York City are therefore much more likely to lack aid or assistance in their daily lives. This isolation is likely compounded by the uneven welcome that LGBT elders experience in mainstream aging programs at senior centers or other institutional settings. Consequently, many LGBT elders do not seek services or engagement within mainstream aging settings out of fear of discrimination, intensifying their sense of isolation.

Estranged by homophobic family members and traditional aging supports, LGBT elders are more likely to experience mental and physical ailments linked to social isolation including depression, cognitive impairment, delayed care-seeking, poor nutrition even premature morbidity and mortality. These factors significantly lessen the quality of life for socially isolated LGBT older adults. Diagnosing and treating isolated LGBT New York older adults for these ailments remains difficult as this group of elders utilize mental health services less than any other age group due to the lack of culturally competent providers.

We know that the best way to address this isolation is to strengthen the social and community support that an LGBT older has in his or her life. An LGBT older adult with access to LGBT-sensitive providers and a broad social network of friends, peers and professional contacts in the LGBT community will have more people to turn to for support when challenges arise.

SAGE's new LGBT senior center, The SAGE Center, established in 2012 through New York City's innovative senior center initiative has been created to ensure that LGBT older adults in all five boroughs can age in good health, financially secure and with broad community support. The SAGE Center is a full-time center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults and will provide a comprehensive array of unique services and holistic programs related to arts and culture, fitness, food and nutrition, health and wellness and lifelong education with the goal of dramatically decreasing social isolation among LGBT elders in the City. Based in Chelsea, The SAGE Center will bring LGBT-affirming programs and welcoming spaces to LGBT elders throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island—building a true center without walls.

SAGE thanks the City Council for holding this hearing and encourages your continued support for innovative aging programs that improve social supports for LGBT older adults.

We thank you for your time and attention to these important concerns.

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