

LGBT OLDER ADULTS AND REAUTHORIZATION OF THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT

POLICY BRIEF

sageSM
Services & Advocacy
for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
& Transgender Elders



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Services & Advocacy
for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
& Transgender Elders

THE
FUTURE
OF AGING
IS IN
OUR
HANDS

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE AND EXPO
FOR LGBT OLDER ADULTS

WE ARE A DIVERSE AND RESILIENT COMMUNITY.
WE ARE THE EXPERTS ON OUR LIVES.
WE ARE THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF LGBT AGING.

NOVEMBER 11-13, 2010
CUNY GRADUATE CENTER, CONCOURSE LEVEL
NEW YORK CITY

sageusa.org

This conference is made possible through the generous support of The Atlantic Philanthropies, Inc. and M-A-C AIDS Fund.

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‘We are the experts on our lives’ —

so said the theme of last November’s first-ever national advocacy conference led by, for and about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender



(LGBT) older adults. Hosted by Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders, and planned by a committee of LGBT elders, this historic conference gathered hundreds of people from around the country to discuss the pressing policy concerns shaping their lives—from health and wellness, to financial and legal issues, to creating a national

agenda with LGBT elders at the forefront. **Yet perhaps no other policy issue loomed larger among conference attendees than the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act, scheduled to begin in 2011.** Considered the country’s most significant vehicle for delivering services to older adults, the Older Americans Act holds enormous potential for millions of LGBT older adults, a population

with profound needs that will surge over the next few decades. To draw on the wisdom of LGBT elders united at this conference, SAGE commissioned an investigative story that describes the potential of this Act in supporting our communities.

What are the distinct challenges facing LGBT elders, and how can their aging experiences be enhanced through an LGBT-affirming Older Americans Act? Here are their stories—and here are SAGE’s official recommendations on the Older Americans Act.



Top: Herb Cohen, a member of SAGE’s National Leadership Council

Bottom right: Nancy K. Bereano, Founding CEO of Firebrand Books

Opposite page: “The Future of Aging is in Our Hands: A National Conference and Expo for LGBT Older Adults” gathered hundreds of LGBT older adults from 21 states, across every region of the country. The conference was held in November 2010 in New York City, and was made possible through the generous support of The Atlantic Philanthropies, Inc. and M•A•C AIDS Fund.



A conference plenary on reauthorization of the Older Americans Act and its potential for LGBT elders. **From left to right:** Michael Adams, SAGE; Sandy Warshaw, SAGE Advocate; Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, Commissioner, NYC Department for the Aging; Greg Case, Administration on Aging; Amy E. Gotwals, National Association of Area Agencies on Aging; and John Cochran, New York State Office for the Aging (November 12, 2010).

BY SEAN KENNEDY
February 2011



SAGE POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

The Older Americans Act should expand on its definitions of “minority,” “greatest social need” and “vulnerable elder” to specify lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults.

The Two Sides of LGBT Aging: In the Absence of Sufficient Resources, Older Adults are Creating Them

After her partner of eight years passed away, Doloris Miller, 75, was evicted from their Greenwich Village home. The landlord saw an opportunity to “triple the rent,” Miller says, and she couldn’t stop him: only her partner’s name was on the lease, and though she and Joan had completed a domestic-partnership application, they hadn’t filed it with the New York City clerk’s office. They also lacked wills and a joint checking account. So when her case went to trial, Miller could offer little to demonstrate her right to the Christopher Street apartment. Worse, Joan’s relatives alleged that she was heterosexual, suggesting that Miller was merely a friend. The result? In March 2010, Miller was forced onto the street, homeless.

She slept in Penn Station for three nights and then entered a shelter, where she remains today.

Heightened Vulnerability Among LGBT Elders

Despite limited data on LGBT people, the available research shows that LGBT elders face significant barriers to successful aging, including:

- **Fewer sources of support.**

LGBT elders are twice as likely to be single and three to four times more likely to be without children than their heterosexual counterparts.

- **Higher poverty rates.**

Same-sex couples face higher poverty rates than their heterosexual peers; 9.1% and 4.9% among elder lesbian and gay couples, respectively, in contrast to 4.6% among elder heterosexual couples.

- **Poor health and health access.**

Because of inaccessible health insurance, anti-LGBT stigma and a widespread lack of LGBT sensitive health care, LGBT communities experience heightened disparities in health and health care across the lifespan.

Source: Movement Advancement Project and Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders, *Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults*. (Denver and New York: MAP and SAGE, 2010). Available at sageusa.org.

“I guess I have to admit you’re talking to one angry person because it just feels so helpless,” says Miller, who retired from a job in the appellate division of the New York state supreme court. “It’s very important that it’s stressed to the LGBT community to have your affairs in order. Otherwise, you could end up homeless like me.”

Indeed, Miller isn’t alone in the challenges she faced—far from it. In marked contrast to their heterosexual peers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) older adults must contend with a range of issues that stem from continuing social stigma: namely, prejudice among family members and the public at large, which often leaves them alone and isolated; the inability to gain crucial legal and financial protections because their families of choice aren’t recognized; and a dearth of cultural competence among health-care and aging providers. Furthermore, because their unique needs are only beginning to be systematically addressed, LGBT older adults typically lack the information and resources required to meet these challenges. As Miller says, she meant to “get around” to taking steps to protect herself—but then circumstances intervened.

Miller, a regal woman who can trace her lineage back to the Mayflower, was one of more than 400 LGBT elders who came together from across the country last November in New York to share their stories and seek solutions. Organized by LGBT older adults themselves—along with the national organization Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders (SAGE)—the three-day conference focused on all aspects of the LGBT aging experience but centered on a common theme, as reflected in the event’s title: “The Future of Aging is in Our Hands.” And to a person, the conference attendees, diverse in background and age, expressed that desire for change.

“Employers, landlords, health-care officials, law makers—we need to let them know we have to have equal rights and justice just like anybody else,” says a 55-year-old transgender man from Chicago (who asked to be anonymous so that he wouldn’t face harassment back home for his gender identity and expression). Indeed, that’s the message all LGBT older adults want to convey as the Older Americans Act comes up for reauthorization this spring.

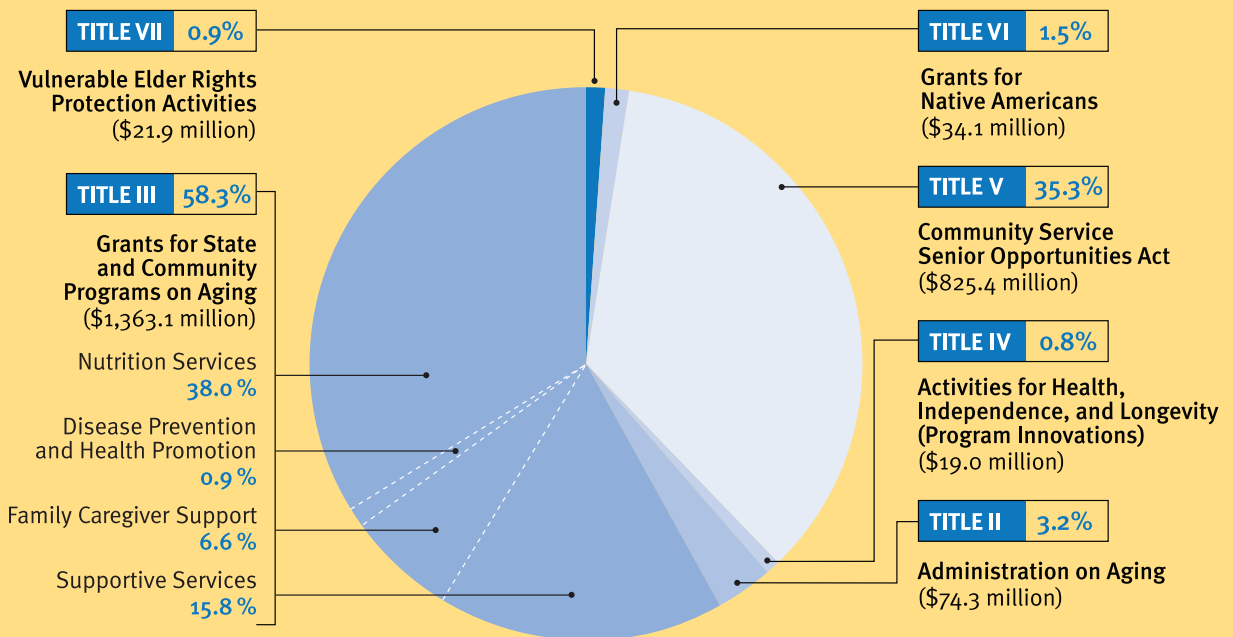
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ABOUT THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT

Established in 1965, the Older Americans Act is the country’s leading vehicle for funding and delivering supportive services to older people in this country—managed by the Administration on Aging at the federal level, and by the Aging Services Network in communities around the country, which includes hundreds of state and area agencies on aging, and thousands of service providers and Tribal organizations.

In 2011, the Older Americans Act comes up for reauthorization, creating an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that these sizable resources support LGBT older adults and their loved ones.

A profound potential resource for LGBT older adults, the Older Americans Act provided \$2.3 billion to aging services nationwide in FY 2010



Source: National Health Policy Forum, *The Basics: Older Americans Act of 1965* (Washington, DC: NHPF: 2010). Available at nhpf.org.



Above: Amy E. Gotwals, Director of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs at the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4A), speaks about the relationship between OAA and aging providers nationwide. n4A supports a national network of 629 Area Agencies on Aging and 246 Title VI Native American aging programs. **To her left:** Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, Commissioner, NYC Department for the Aging; and Greg Case, Director of the Office of Home and Community-Based Services, Administration on Aging.

Community in the city, but few resources

At 64, Denise Bonenfant is on the leading edge of the baby-boom generation now entering its later years. And within that generation is the largest cohort yet of LGBT people who have lived their lives openly. Bonenfant, who would've been 23 in 1969, the year of the Stonewall riots in New York that launched the modern-day LGBT equality movement, lived with her partner, Sunny, for 32 years in Brooklyn Heights until Sunny passed away from heart disease and cancer in 2007. "I was a caregiver for the last five years, and she only made me promise that I wouldn't take her to a hospital," Bonenfant says. "So she died at home, watching television with the dog in her lap. That was a blessing."

But there were certainly difficulties along the way, even in a city that Bonenfant says feels like the "center of the universe." For one thing, Sunny had no health insurance, and Bonenfant, who'd worked in international sales before going on disability because of a bad back, was unable to cover her through her policy. So they used their savings



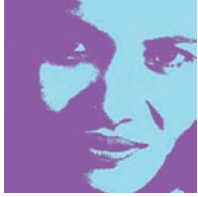
**SAGE POLICY
RECOMMENDATION:**

The Older Americans Act should ensure that its mandates regarding data collection, project assessments and reporting are evaluating whether services and programs are effectively reaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults.

and credit cards to pay for her medical bills, which left Bonenfant nearly broke upon Sunny's death.

And although the couple had wills and health proxies and powers of attorney for each other, they had seen a close friend be denied access to her dying lover by the lover's estranged family. "Sunny and I said this ain't happening to us," she says, so they told medical professionals they were sisters. (No one ever checked.) It meant going back into the closet, "which I fought so hard to get out of," but "nobody was going to keep us away from each other."

For Al Swadi-Chuto, 62, the law stands in the way of him and his Thai partner, whom Swadi-Chuto can't sponsor for permanent-resident status. And while the Older Americans Act doesn't address this legal issue, the inequity means that Swadi-Chuto, who worked in New York City's flower industry before developing leg problems, must rely on a part-time home attendant to look after him instead of a loved one who could live with him. "I want him to come here and take care of me



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Opposite page: Mandy Carter, Co-Founder of the National Black Justice Coalition, speaks during the opening plenary. This panel of LGBT older activists described their own defining moments of personal empowerment, as well as the key political issues facing LGBT elders today. **To her immediate left:** Patty L. Collins, Cherokee-Choctaw, Traditional Healer & Documentary Filmmaker. **To her right:** Barbara Satin, Institute for Welcoming Resources & Faith Work Associate, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

because he loves me,” says Swadi-Chuto, who’s originally from Thailand himself (he moved to the United States 45 years ago). “If we were a straight couple, I could marry him and he could get a green card. But as it is, I have to leave him.” Accordingly, Swadi-Chuto is largely on his own—although fortunately he has a caseworker at SAGE.

Indeed, although urban areas tend to have significantly more resources for LGBT people overall, they still lack services for older adults. While there are a few retirement communities and assisted-living facilities dedicated to LGBT older adults already in place around the country—and a nursing home in the works—this capacity doesn’t begin to address the overall need. For elders fearful of entering an inhospitable environment, the lack of widespread options is another cause of concern. As Swadi-Chuto says: “I don’t want to go in a nursing home. I want to be around LGBT people in a center paid for by Medicaid.”

In rural areas, fewer resources and increased isolation

The lack of resources for older LGBT adults is particularly acute in rural areas of the country. John Phillips, 45, lives in Pineville, Louisiana, in the middle of the state, and there’s no LGBT community center or other places to gather save for two gay bars. And though he’s not yet an elder, Phillips has already seen what it’s like to grow older in an area without institutional support: he and his partner look after an isolated 84-year-old friend an hour south of them in Lafayette. The man came out in his 60s and “his wife and children washed their hands of him, so he has no family,” says Phillips, a former travel agent now studying industrial electronics at the local community college. “So we check on him and make sure that he’s taken care of as best as we can.” That includes accompanying him to medical appointments and, in the case of a few surgeries, staying for the night (or several days).

Phillips and his partner also act as caregivers for a longtime friend who rents a room from them. The man lived through Hurricane Katrina and then his partner died; now his health is deteriorating. “He needed



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a stable life. We give him that. We’re his family,” Phillips says. Along with that support, Phillips and his partner help the man with basic tasks like bathing and transportation. They also provide medical care, such as administering a weekly injection for the man’s hepatitis C. But having buried two partners due to AIDS, Phillips is used to taking care of loved ones. “I can’t stand needles or blood but you do what you have to do,” he says. “I just see a situation that needs to be taken care of and I do the best I can to get through it.”

Needless to say, these efforts exact an emotional toll, and while Phillips sees a therapist occasionally, there weren’t any specific resources for LGBT caregivers in his region until he started a support group—the first program of the SAGE affiliate he and others have developed: SAGE Cenla (Central Louisiana). He’s also lobbying community leaders for an anti-discrimination ordinance and trying to get a dental clinic for HIV-positive patients operating again after it was closed because of a bureaucratic dispute.

“I want to improve the place that I call home,” says Phillips, whose family has lived in the Pineville area for generations. “I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

Bonenfant, too, is trying to improve the place she calls home, which is now Barryville, New York, in rural Sullivan County—some two hours by car from Brooklyn Heights. She couldn’t afford the apartment she lived in with Sunny on her own, so Bonenfant sold it and decamped to their upstate property. But while there’s a local branch of the New York State Office for the Aging nearby and a few privately run aging centers, Bonenfant wouldn’t feel comfortable visiting them. “They’re all very nice straight people, but I’m no more going to go there and say, ‘Hi, I’m a lesbian,’ than I’m going to jump off the roof of this building,” she says.

Instead, she drives an hour and 45 minutes one way to the Hudson Valley LGBTQ Community Center in Kingston, New York, which houses a SAGE affiliate. There she volunteers and has found a group of friends. She’s also trying to establish a network for LGBT people closer to home. “I know there’s gay people in Sullivan County, she says. “I just have to dig them out.”



SAGE Executive Director Michael Adams listens to SAGE Advocate Sandy Warshaw describe the importance of culturally competent aging services for LGBT elders. Warshaw served as one of seven members of the constituent-led conference planning committee.

The need for cultural competence

Given the absence of LGBT-specific aging resources, advocates are focused on making aging services more respectful and understanding. Stories of prejudice are legion, such as those offered by Myron Gold, 70, a wheelchair-bound former fashion designer who lives in New York City. “I had home attendants over the years that wouldn’t wash me because they said they’re not ‘homos,’” he says. “I even had an aide who wouldn’t walk me around the park because he was upset that he would be perceived as gay if he was holding on to my hand.” But when Gold reported such problems to his home-care agency, “they didn’t know how to deal with it,” he says. “They just let it drop and then did nothing about it.”



José Martin Garcia Orduña, from the Union Settlement Association, speaks with Robert Nakatani from the ACLU LGBT & AIDS Project.
In the background: Mandy Carter, Co-Founder of the National Black Justice Coalition and Michael Adams, SAGE Executive Director.

Fortunately Gold's current home attendant, a young Muslim man originally from Togo, has "no problems" with his sexual orientation, Gold says—a huge relief as he looks after Gold for 60 hours a week. But Gold, who contracted HIV in 1993 and takes 62 pills a day, remains concerned about the quality of his health care. In his experience, most doctors lack expertise in the intersection of gay and geriatric issues, particularly insofar as HIV is concerned. "They'll treat me the same way they'll treat somebody half my age. But that doesn't work because I'm older and the medicines are not working the way they work for the younger people."

Providers also need improved cultural competence so they can treat transgender elders fairly. Fostering this awareness is of particular interest to the 55-year-old transgender man from Chicago, who was the beneficiary of such understanding as a member of a coming-out group at the city's LGBT-oriented Center on Halsted. For years the man suffered prejudice and harassment for not conforming to gender norms, but the group was the first place where "there wasn't no



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SEAN KENNEDY is a writer, editor, and media consultant based in Brooklyn, New York. Formerly on staff at *Interview*, *New York*, and *The Advocate*, where he served as the news and features editor, he's also contributed to CNN, *Newsweek*, *The Daily Beast*, *Elle*, *Salon*, *Nerve*, *Time Out New York*, and *Out*, among others. For more info, visit www.sean-kennedy.com.

judgment," he says. "Nobody was looking at me like, OK, you look like a guy but you're a female."

Now, through the national SAGE Advocates program, which supports SAGE affiliates and LGBT older adults around the country in developing the skills to advocate on their own behalf, he's training to become another voice in local and national policy efforts concerning LGBT older adults. His first priority is caregivers.

"How do they take care of us without being afraid they may get AIDS, which ain't got nothing to do with anything?" he says. Or in the case of a person whose gender expression diverges from his or her biological sex, "how do caretakers handle that? Do they freak out?" After all, transgender clients "still need to be bathed" regardless of caregivers' personal reactions. And, he adds, in such a vulnerable situation, transgender people are probably "just as scared" as their caregivers. Indeed, the same might be said for LGBT elders at large.

Focusing on solutions

Like this man and Bonenfant and Phillips, Patty Collins, a Native American who lives in the Denver area, is also advocating for herself and others. One way she's doing that is by making a film about traditional indigenous life before the arrival of European settlers—as Collins puts it, she's "bringing voices to the screen that have not been heard." Likewise, she insists on including diverse voices in her work with fellow LGBT advocates. "I've never worked with an all-white group," Collins, who holds a law degree and once ran a nursing home in Arizona, says. "I've always been a bridge builder and I've always worked with other bridge builders in coalition."

Doloris Miller has become an advocate too: she's starting a website to give LGBT older adults the information they need so they don't wind up homeless like she did. But Miller also wants to engage her peers in political action, in advance of the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. That's why her website is called Senior VVVV, "which means voices, visibility, vision—and votes."

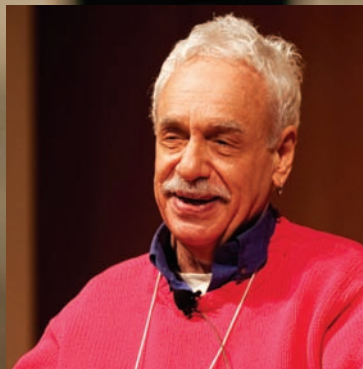
SAGE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON REAUTHORIZATION OF THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT

1. The Older Americans Act should expand on its definitions of “minority,” “greatest social need” and “vulnerable elder” to specify lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults.
2. The Older Americans Act should ensure that its mandates regarding data collection, project assessments and reporting are evaluating whether services and programs are effectively reaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults.
3. The Older Americans Act should ensure that its definitions, services and programs account for the family structures and support systems of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults, which include blood relatives as well as “families of choice” such as friends, partners and other loved ones.
4. The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging—which provides training, technical assistance and educational resources to aging providers, LGBT organizations and LGBT older adults nationwide—should be permanently established in the Older Americans Act, ensuring that the Act’s overarching purpose to improve the lives of all older people recognizes the unique needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders.
5. The Older Americans Act should support cultural competence programs that train and support aging providers in better serving lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults.



Above: English Perez, Board President, SAGE Cenla (Central Louisiana) **Right:** Peter Catenacci, CFP, a member of SAGE’s board of directors, during a workshop session on the importance of legal and financial planning.





From left to right: Robert Nakatani, Senior Strategist, ACLU's LGBT & AIDS Project; Jonathan Ned Katz, Author, Activist and Co-Director of Outhistory.org; and Sherman Walker, a member of the conference planning committee.

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the Older Americans Act?

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Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) is the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults. Our mission is to lead in addressing issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) aging. In partnership with its constituents and allies, SAGE works to achieve a high quality of life for LGBT older adults, supports and advocates for their rights, fosters a greater understanding of aging in all communities, and promotes positive images of LGBT life in later years.