



We refuse to be invisible

Testimony to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee on Human Services

**Delivered in person on January 31, 2020
by Melissa Sklarz, Senior Government Relations Strategist**

My name is Melissa Sklarz and I am SAGE's Senior Government Relations Strategist. Thank you to members of the Senate and Assembly for holding this hearing today and allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of SAGE.

SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT elders. Founded in New York City in 1978, SAGE provides services and programs to LGBT older people through our five SAGE Centers across the City, 4 SAGE affiliates here in New York State, including Bay Shore, Hudson Valley, Syracuse, and Rochester, and a network of affiliates in 25 cities across the U.S.

Services for older New Yorkers are crucial – and will become even more important. According to LiveOn New York, by 2030, 20% of New Yorkers will be over the age of 60.

LGBT elders are a significant part of this rapidly growing older population. However, they are often invisible, disconnected from services and severely isolated. LGBT elders are twice as likely to live alone; half as likely to be partnered; and more than four times less likely to have kids. Many LGBT elders were shunned by their families and, are half as likely to have close relatives to call for help. Roughly 25% of LGBT elders have no one to call in case of an emergency.

Because of their thin support networks, LGBT older people need to rely more heavily on community service providers for care as they age. Yet, they're often distrustful of mainstream providers – and for good reason. LGBT older people are more likely to face discrimination around their sexual orientation and gender identity when accessing health care, social services or other programs. For so many LGBT elders, SAGE is their safety net.

Housing:

LGBT older people face profound challenges in accessing welcoming housing. A 2014 ten-state investigation conducted by the Equal Rights Center and SAGE found that 48% of same-sex older

couple testers seeking housing in senior independent living facilities across the country experienced discrimination.¹

In New York City, housing challenges are particularly acute. Countless LGBT older people find themselves priced out of the neighborhoods in which they have lived for years due to rising rents and financial insecurity as they age. This housing crisis among LGBT older people will only worsen as the LGBT elder population doubles and more “out” LGBT people age into their retirement years.

Recognizing the acute need for LGBT-welcoming housing, SAGE and our partners, HELP USA and BFC Partners, are opening New York State’s very first LGBT-welcoming senior housing. Located in Ft. Greene, Brooklyn, Stonewall House, with 145 units, is the nation’s largest LGBT-welcoming elder housing development. SAGE cut the ribbon on this building in December of 2019 and LGBT elders and allies are already calling this building home. Later this spring, Crotona Senior Residences, located on Crotona Park in the Bronx, will open and offer 83 units of safe, LGBT-welcoming housing to older Bronxites. The marquee of each development is a full-service, state-of-the-art, ground-floor SAGE Center, built on our successful model.

These two developments are history making for our state and game changing for our city’s elders. These buildings will help to alleviate poverty, improve housing security and overall health outcomes for New York City’s most vulnerable LGBT elders. By helping low income and vulnerable LGBT people age in their communities with independence and dignity, these buildings will serve as a model “Aging in Community” initiative and help build the national field of support and services for LGBT elder people.

Already many of the LGBT elders who attend SAGE Centers daily struggle with mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness, requiring intensive amounts of Care Management and social service support. With Stonewall House open to residents and Crotona due to open in April, we expect higher levels of needs among the residents and the elders in the surrounding communities. Thus, SAGE will require additional investment in our care management and SAGE Center programming to meet these needs.

SAGE requests \$100,000 in support from New York State to provide comprehensive care management, SAGE Center programming and support services to low income, predominantly LGBT elder residents in and around our State’s very first LGBT welcoming elder housing developments. SAGE also requests a restoration of \$200,000 in support of our general services and expenses in support of our state’s LGBT elders. In total SAGE requests a restoration of \$300,000 in SF21.

Veterans Programs:

New York is home to approximately one million men and women who served in the Armed Forces. When ranked by the number and per capita rate of gay and lesbian veterans, both New

¹ SAGE & Equal Rights Center (2014). *Opening Doors: An Investigation of Barriers to Senior Housing for Same Sex Couples.*

York State and New York City are among the top ten states and cities with highest concentrations of gay and lesbian vets. Here in New York, 54% of over 775,000 veterans are over the age of 65. According to a recent survey by the LGBT Health and Human Services Network, 76% of people who identified as veterans were from Upstate New York and 56% of LGBT veterans were over the age of 50. Nearly 1/3 of LGBT veterans identified as transgender.

SAGE created the SAGEVets program seven years ago, with initial support from New York State, to respond to the swelling need among LGBT vets and to identify, support and provide access to care for LGBT older veterans statewide. With continued support from the State Legislature over the last seven years, SAGEVets provides New York's LGBT elder veterans with LGBT recognition and support, benefits and VA advocacy, access to legal counsel and case management services in order to improve their overall well-being. The program also educates veterans groups across the state about the unique challenges of the LGBT veterans, increasing awareness about LGBT veterans.

Older LGBT veterans served in the military at a time when discrimination against LGBT people was rampant and a matter of official government policy. As a result, many LGBT elder veterans often do not access their federal VA and related benefits. SAGEVets saves New York State significant amounts of funding by ensuring that veterans access the federal benefits to which they are entitled.

The New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network has found that:

- 43% of lesbian, gay and bisexual vets live at under 200% of the Federal Poverty line; for transgender veterans, this number was nearly 60%
- 30% of LGB veterans and 46% of transgender vets were homeless
- 30% of LGB veterans and 48% of transgender vets fear discrimination from providers

SAGE has maximized state support to connect LGBT older veterans across the great Empire State with critical services. SAGEVets has:

- Reached a total over 4,600 veterans and individuals statewide;
- Presented to over 600 veterans, caregivers and providers on LGBT and older veteran issues at senior centers, nursing homes, veterans' service agencies, and more; and
- Provided information and referrals to over 200 veterans.

In State FY21, SAGE respectfully requests an increase in funding, requesting \$150,000 in funding to continue the crucial outreach to and benefits connection for LGBT older veterans. The increased support will expand SAGEVets program and access for LGBT elder veterans throughout the state through a re-grant to SAGE affiliates at Out Alliance in Rochester and SAGE Upstate in Syracuse.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. I look forward to answering any questions.