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WEBHEALTH TOPICS

Priscilla L. Stephenson and Mary Virginia Taylor, Column Editors

LGBT Senior Health Disparities: Information Resources to Bridge the Gap

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Abstract:

As the senior population in the United States increases, the aging LGBT population should also see comparable growth rates. Healthcare providers and social service organizations will care for more LGBT seniors with special needs beyond the general population of older adults as they are more at risk for certain conditions. This article identifies some specific health disparities and examines some of the organizations that work to improve LGBT senior health through providing critical health information to LGBT older adults, caregivers, and healthcare professionals.

Keywords: LGBT, transgender, sexual minorities, health disparities, older adults, seniors

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Introduction

The number of older adults in the United States is growing significantly. It is estimated that by the year 2030, there will be about 72 million Americans aged 65 or older, representing about 20 percent of the population. By the year 2050, that number will increase to almost 89 million.¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) seniors will make up a sizeable portion of this population. Currently it is estimated that 1.1 million Americans aged 65 and older identify as LGBT, or about 2.4% of the US population.² As the older population in general increases, the aging LGBT population should also see comparable growth rates.

With the increase in these numbers over the next few decades, health care providers and social services organizations will see more seniors who identify as LGBT. These seniors have special needs beyond those of the general population of older adults, as LGBT adults are more at risk for certain conditions. Learning to identify and address these disparities will be one of the challenges for healthcare professionals and service organizations. This article will address these disparities,

as well as examining some organizations, services, and information resources that work to improve LGBT senior health.

LGBT seniors are more susceptible to mental illness than non-LGBT persons. Research shows that LGB adults are about twice as likely as heterosexuals to attempt suicide and are 1.5 times more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety.³ It also appears that transgender persons are also at a significantly greater risk for mental health disorders. One recent study suggested that transgender persons are more than twice as likely to suffer from depression, panic disorder, and other serious mental illnesses, and more than four times as likely to have attempted suicide or had suicidal ideation.⁴ It is also estimated that one quarter of older adults have a mental health problem unrelated to normal aging.¹ When this factor is combined with the higher risk of mental health issues among LGBT adults, the need for special consideration of the mental health of LGBT seniors becomes apparent.

Substance abuse is another area in which LGBT seniors are at greater risk. LGBT seniors smoke and abuse drugs and alcohol more than their heterosexual peers, which can lead to other chronic conditions.^{3,5} Additionally, lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to be overweight or obese than heterosexual women. When that tendency is combined with substance abuse, these women become more susceptible to chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, and type 2 diabetes.^{5,6}

Older adults are just as vulnerable as younger adults to contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and rates of infection among seniors are significant. Over one quarter of HIV-infected persons in the United States in 2013 were 55 or older.⁷ In 2014, persons over 50 years old represented 17 percent of HIV diagnoses.⁷ However, there is not currently routine screening of older adults for HIV despite the recommendations by most US guidelines to

screen all high-risk adults at all ages.⁸ Additionally, men who have sex with men (MSM) remain at a higher risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.⁹ Because many of them belong to both demographic groups, it can be inferred that older MSM are at an especially high risk of contracting HIV.

As a special health concern for transgender women, some research has suggested a possible link between some types of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and cardiovascular events in male-to-female patients.¹⁰ Other possible effects of HRT include insulin resistance, increased triglycerides, and osteopenia.^{10,11} Because many of these conditions, such as cardiovascular disease and osteopenia, are often found in older persons, it would be safe to infer that trans seniors have an especially high risk of these conditions and should be monitored closely by healthcare professionals.

Finally, a danger with all older adults is polypharmacy. As some LGBT persons may be on serious chronic medications such as HRT or antiretroviral therapy for HIV, there is an opportunity for the LGBT senior to be on long-term drug therapies which might cause serious side effects.⁸

There are a variety of online information resources that address these physical and mental health disparities that occur in the LGBT senior population. Not all of the resources specifically address these disparities in terms of both age and sexual orientation. Because of the intersectional identity of LGBT older adults, information sources on either LGBT health or on senior health alone can be useful. However, there are also sources that are intended for LGBT seniors specifically. All of these resources, though, can be useful information sources for LGBT seniors, caregivers, and healthcare professionals.

MedlinePlus <<https://medlineplus.gov/>>

MedlinePlus is the National Library of Medicine's web site for consumer health information, with links to reliable sources of information for the general public. The information resources available at MedlinePlus illustrate how high quality information is available but only by addressing a single demographic's information needs. The page on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Health features links to a variety of governmental and organizational websites. Some of these sources are broken down by gender and age. Many articles are related to LGBT senior health disparities such as HIV/AIDS and hormone treatments for transgender persons. However, there is only one resource indexed specifically for seniors, a brochure from the Alzheimer's Association on LGBT Caregiver Concerns. Likewise, there is a MedlinePlus page highlighting resources on Seniors' Health but none of these specifically address LGBT seniors. Among the resources highlighted on this page, however, are links to two pages from the National Institute on Aging, *Sexuality in Later Life* and *Aging with HIV: Responding to an emerging challenge*, and a page on *Older Adults and Depression* from the National Institute of Mental Health.

National Institute on Aging <<https://www.nia.nih.gov/>>

Another governmental resource providing senior health information is the website for the National Institute on Aging (NIA), a division of the National Institutes of Health. This website, like MedlinePlus, does not have consumer health information specifically tailored to LGBT seniors and their specific concerns. However, the focus of the website is to provide health information on physical and mental conditions and public policy that affect older adults. The majority of the consumer health information may be found in the Health Information section of

the website. Users may search for a specific topic by using the A to Z index or use the basic search box at the top of the page. Some examples of topic pages that specifically address LGBT senior health disparities include *Tips on Discussing Sensitive Topics with Your Doctor* and *HIV, AIDS, and Older People*. The latter page features sections such as “Is HIV/AIDS Different in Older People?” and Caring for a Person with HIV/AIDS. Of special note is the section on HIV/AIDS in People of Color and Women, which cites the high rate of infection among women of color 50 and older. Most of the pages feature boxes with titles such as “Grace’s Story” or “Al’s Story”, offering short vignettes about how a given health issue can affect an older person’s life in a more personal manner. At the end of each page is a short list of organizations that can provide more information on the given subject, with both URLs and phone numbers provided for most organizations.

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

Legend: FIGURE 1. Sample page from NIA

SAGE <<http://www.sageusa.org/>>

The largest organization dedicated to providing services to LGBT seniors is Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE). Formed in 1978, SAGE provides services through its own centers as well as through partnerships in 20 states. The group also advocates for seniors by working with governmental agencies and participates in initiatives such as the White House Conference on Aging.¹² SAGE offers a number of services for LGBT seniors through their SAGE Centers in New York City and the SAGENet network of affiliate centers across the country. Users of the website can locate programs and information on a variety of issues affecting LGBT seniors including social services, information on the SAGENet affiliate centers

and the SAGE Centers in New York, and a link to SAGE's LGBT Elder Hotline. The Issues section provides access to topics on Health and Health Care, Health Reform, Medicare Fraud, and HIV and Aging. The Publications section provides access to the SAGE Publication library with access to several online brochures published by SAGE such as *Ten Things Every LGBT Older Adult Should Know About HIV and AIDS* and similar titles on heart disease, diabetes, and falls prevention. Two of the *Ten Things* publications are also available in Spanish. For transgender seniors, a brochure on *Improving the Lives of Transgender Older Adults* is available. There are also reports addressing specific groups of LGBT seniors, such as *Health Equity & LGBT Elders of Color* and *In Their Own Words: A Needs Assessment of Hispanic LGBT Older Adults*.

National Resource Center on LGBT Aging <<http://lgbtagingcenter.org/>>

Many of the resources shared on the SAGE website refer users to the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging, a division of SAGE. According to its website, the Center is “the country's first and only technical assistance resource center aimed at improving the quality of services and supports offered to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults.”¹³ The resources provided in the Health section are designed for both seniors and those who provide services to them. One resource, the LGBT Health Aging Toolkit, offers a range of links to websites intended to improve the physical, mental, sexual, and spiritual needs of older adults. Many of the resources, are brochures authored either by SAGE or other organizations to address various health issues. Some examples of the publications shared include *Accessing Information on Medicare Benefits for LGBT People* and a fact sheet on resources for LGBT Veterans. Besides written publications, there are many multimedia presentations. Examples of these on health

topics include a video on hospital visitation directives presented by an attorney at Lambda Legal and a recording of the webinar *Amputee Coalition: Limb Loss in the LGBT Community*.

[PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE]

Legend: FIGURE 2. Health Resources home page for National Resource Center on LGBT

Aging

(Image used with permission of SAGE)

LGBT Aging Issues Network <<http://asaging.org/lain>>

The American Society on Aging (ASA)'s LGBT Aging Issues Network, also known as LAIN, is designed to raise awareness about the concerns of LGBT elders and the unique barriers they encounter in gaining access to housing, healthcare, long-term care, and other services. LAIN's goal is to foster professional development, multidisciplinary research, and improve the dialogue of LGBT aging issues through publications, conferences, and educational events.¹⁴ One of the resources featured on the LAIN website is the LGBT Aging Resources Clearinghouse, which includes content for LGBT people aged 50-plus. This clearinghouse contains annotated listings for service providers, community and professional organizations, information sites, reports and articles, and links to DVDs, books, and other useful products. Unfortunately the clearinghouse has not been updated since 2011 so much of the information is out of date. Newer information on health and aging may be found through the ASA's blog (<<http://asaging.org/blog/content-source/14>>) which features a variety of news stories related to LGBT aging.

GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBT Equality <<http://glma.org>>

For the LGBT aging population, locating a doctor they can trust to provide the care they need without fear of discrimination is important. GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBT Equality is an organization with the mission to ensure equality in healthcare for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and healthcare providers.¹⁵ The Resources for Patients page provides a number of resources for the health consumer: a “ten things patients should discuss with their healthcare providers” resource, transgender health resources, and a provider directory to help people locate LGBT friendly providers.

Centerlink: The Community of LGBT Centers <<http://www.lgbtcenters.org/>>

Centerlink is an online organization that serves approximately 200 LGBT community centers across the country. This resource provides a listing of local, state, and national LGBT organizations and groups and a directory of LGBT centers open to the public. The directory can help seniors and caregivers locate local centers that may provide programs for LGBT older adults including resource and referral information, social and cultural programs, discussion groups, education, exercise classes, health and wellness programs, and mental health.

Transgender Aging Network (TAN) <<http://forge-forward.org/aging/>>

Another useful online service, FORGE is a national transgender anti-violence organization founded in 1994 with the goal to provide training and technical assistance to providers around the country who work with transgender survivors of sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and stalking.¹⁶ In addition, FORGE created the Transgender Aging Network (TAN) to improve the lives of current and future trans elders. The goal of TAN is to promote awareness of

concerns, issues, and realities of the trans aging populations by offering two listservs for professionals and the elder trans population and their support network.¹⁷ Their website includes numerous hours of videos and publications to help inform providers and support the trans community.

CONCLUSION

As the LGBT senior population continues to grow, improving knowledge of resources and organizations to address a variety of physical and mental health concerns for older LGBT adults is increasingly important. While some resources highlighted in this article specifically address LGBT seniors and the health disparities regarding this population, others are limited in topic coverage. Continuous development of topics specifically intended for this population is crucial to improve their health and increase awareness.

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