

Generation Q: Report looks at issues facing GLBT elders

by David Elliot
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC — A newly released study, *Outing Age: Public Policy Issues Facing Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders*, is believed to be the first comprehensive report to address public policy issues facing millions of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) seniors in the United States. The report was released at the annual Creating Change Conference last month in Atlanta, sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF).

Estimated to range from one to three million seniors, the GLBT senior population is growing, and an even larger wave of openly GLBT people will enter aging service programs over the next 30 years. Yet, as *Outing Age* notes, no government-sponsored research on aging includes sexual orientation or gender identity variables. The lack of data results in policy and practices that ignore the unique realities and needs of old GLBT people.

"While we know a lot about the basic demographics of people 65 and older in this country, there is next to no information about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender elders," said Sean Cahill, report co-author and research director of the NGLTF Policy Institute. "This report brings together what research has been published to date, but more importantly lays out a much-needed agenda for the future."

Outing Age outlines the major public policy frameworks that address the needs of GLBT seniors and shows the ways in which they exclude GLBT lives. The report reveals that several federal programs that aim to serve seniors blatantly exclude or otherwise discriminate against GLBT elders.

For example, Social Security pays survivor benefits to widows and widowers but not to surviving spouses of same-sex life partners. This may cost GLBT elders \$124 million a year in benefits. Medicaid regulations protect the assets and homes of married spouses but offer no such protection to same-sex partners. Tax laws and other 401(k) and pensions discriminate against same-sex partners, costing the surviving partner tens of thousands of dollars a year, and possibly over \$1 million during the course of a lifetime.

In addition, *Outing Age* points out the existence of bias in the provision of services to GLBT seniors. Homophobia in the nursing homes, health care settings and among providers caring for the elderly has been documented by studies cited in the report. For example, in one study nearly half of the surveyed agencies, which distribute federal funding for senior services, reported that gays and lesbians would not be welcome at senior centers if their sexual orientation were known. In another survey, 52 percent of nursing home staff reported intolerant or condemning attitudes toward homosexuality among residents.

Meanwhile nursing home and hospital regulations can create barriers to same-sex partners seeking cohabitation or visitation rights. Given the lack of training and overall silence on GLBT aging issues among mainstream service providers, and given the pervasive prejudice that GLBT people encounter in many settings, it is likely that bias is more widespread than documented. The report calls for greater research, training and attention on the part of service providers to the needs of GLBT seniors. The

report also calls for increases in funding for those programs providing targeted services to GLBT elders.

Findings in the report demonstrate that GLBT elders may be more likely to face poverty and economic insecurity while simultaneously facing unique obstacles to basic health care and social services. In 1992, one in four elders living alone or not living with relatives was poor. Since many studies indicate that GLBT seniors are more likely to live alone and lack legally recognized family support networks, GLBT seniors may experience poverty at higher rates than heterosexual seniors.

This situation is particularly striking when one takes into consideration that, even with full access to the benefits, 11 percent of all elders live below the poverty level and another six percent are classified as near poor. Additionally, studies of GLBT people have shown high numbers of uninsured, and note that sexual orientation or gender identity creates additional barriers to accessing healthcare services.

Outing Age will be distributed to key aging and GLBT policy makers and advocates at the local, state and national level, as well as to major media and community based activists across the country. The report proposes specific recommendations for public policy advocates on how to improve the lives of GLBT elders.

The report was the product of NGLTF's Aging Initiative, which was launched in 1999 and is staffed by Ken South. Noted South, "This report not only provides a carefully documented analysis of the issues, but its writing was a major collaborative effort involving dozens of ... lesbians and gay men, policy experts, and gerontologists as well as community-based GLBT elder organizations."

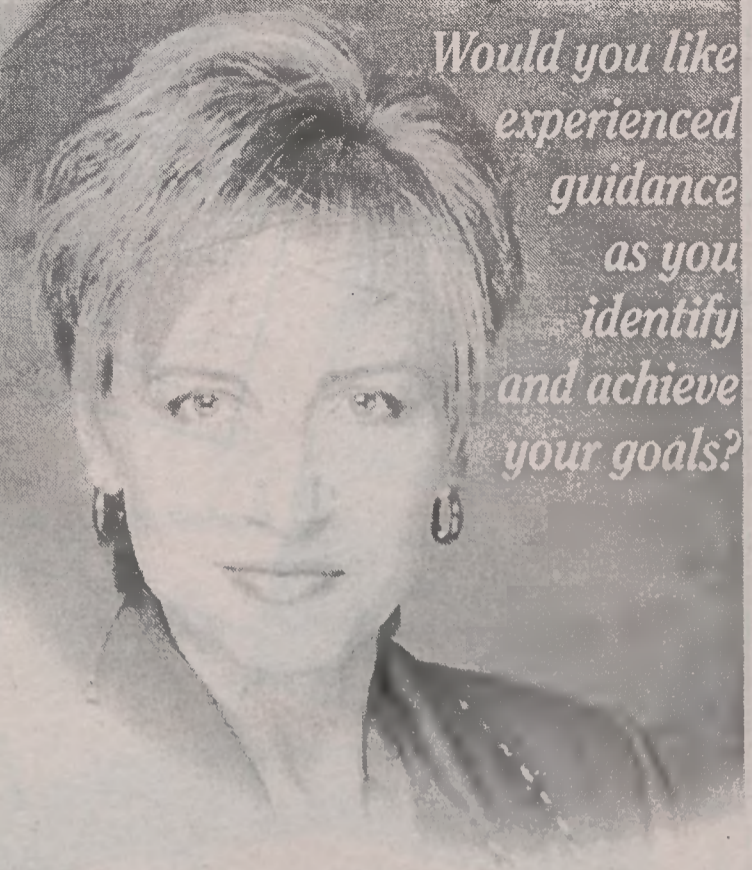
Close consultation and detailed input were received from aging activists around the country, especially leading organizations like Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), Old Lesbians Organizing for Change and Pride Senior Network.

The report can be downloaded for free from the NGLTF website, www.nglft.org. Hard copies can also be ordered online. ▼

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