Results from the LGBT Aging Policy Task Force Focus Group on LGBT Older Adults

Location: Glide Memorial
Date: August 27, 2013, 2:00 – 4:00 pm
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Additional Note Taker: Tom Nolan, LGBTAPTF staff member

The following represent the findings of a focus group conducted by the LGBT Aging Policy Task Force of LGBT older adults.

Participants were provided water and snack bags, $20 VISA gift cards.

The group consisted of six participants, including three gay men, two transgender women, and one lesbian. No one identified as bisexual. Two participants were African American, the rest were White. One gay man identified as HIV positive. All participants indicated that they had moved to San Francisco from elsewhere, mostly between the mid 1970s and 1980s. They had all lived in San Francisco for at least 10 years. Half of the participants indicated that they had served in the military.

Experiences with LGBT welcoming and unwelcoming environments:

Reasons that organizations are perceived as welcoming:

- The organization’s community has a history of experiencing discrimination (e.g., Jewish Family Services)
- Openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender staff (e.g., Pine Methodist Church)
- Hosting LGBT groups or cultural events (e.g., Grace Cathedral having the gay men’s chorus perform in the sanctuary during the height of the AIDS epidemic. It felt like the church was saying, “You’re alright. We are happy to have you here” – he said he “felt my gayness was being sanctified.” Organization with a gay veteran’s group. Laguna Honda Hospital.)
- Activities that happen to attract gay participants (e.g., a lunch program at Grace cathedral that is not targeted as LGBT, but happens to have quite a few gay participants.)
- Advertising friendliness (e.g., churches that promote that they are reconciling in Christ – St. Mark’s Lutheran, Pine Methodist)
- Welcoming/friendly staff demonstrating acceptance of transgender people (Canon Kip, Davies Symphony).
- LGBT or HIV/AIDS targeted organization – Openhouse, AIDS Legal Referral Panel, Positive Resources

Other organizations that were explicitly identified as “welcoming” were Curry Senior Center, Castro Senior Center, Lyon Martin, Women’s Community Clinic, Geezers Against Gangs, Communities United Against Violence, Trans Thrive at API Wellness Center, MCC.
Sometimes the welcoming communities are more clandestine in nature – e.g., informal group of gay doctors who meet at conferences.

- One person recounted an experience he’d had as a part of the gay men’s chorus (was he part of it?) performing at Grace Cathedral during the height of the AIDS epidemic. It felt like the church was saying “You’re alright. We’re happy to have you here.”

One trans woman described her first encounter with Canon Kip as being not so welcoming, but later realized that the staff was very accepting. She wondered if her initial experiences might have been due to her own “internalized transphobia” more than the actual actions of staff or participants at the program.

When asked which organizations participants would turn to if they need help, most said Openhouse. Many of the participants already had a trusting relationship developed with Openhouse, and they also perceived that organization to have the capacity to provide useful information and referrals to other LGBT friendly organizations. Other participants identified Glide and Canon Kip as their primary trusted organizations. In general, participants agreed that they tend to rely on a single, trusted organization as their point of entry to additional services. The only exception was with respect to housing-related issues – one participant indicated that she would go to Openhouse for housing issues because that organization is focused on helping people to stay in San Francisco, while other organizations are sometime more open to other options outside the city.

The group discussed experiences that had been especially unwelcoming:

- A transgender woman described:
  - Being followed into the women’s bathroom at City Hall when working at the polling precinct by a woman who confronted her and told her she shouldn’t be in that bathroom.
  - Being repeatedly addressed as “he” at an SFMTA hearing, despite having shown a driver’s license indicating otherwise and repeated corrections.
  - Being treated with tremendous disrespect by retail staff at Macy’s when shopping for women’s clothing.

- The group discussed ways in which the younger LGBT community was unwelcoming to older people:
  - Older LGBT adults feel that they have become invisible, in part because they are perceived to be “too old to be sexually interesting.” “We’re not on their gay-dar.” Sometimes it feels like younger people are only interested in older LGBT folks when they need money or something material.
  - Those who had participated in efforts to bring younger and older LGBT people together had found that those efforts were fairly unsuccessful.
One transgender participant said that, because she had transitioned here, she had hoped that it would be an enlightened and welcoming city, but that hasn’t always been the case. Later, she reflected that she had grown up in Nebraska, where the population was much smaller and more homogenous. Even so, she wondered if she might be safer, more economically advanced, etc. if she were to move back there.

The group spent a while discussing issues that face transgender people:

- The issue of “transphobia.”
- For one transgender woman who transitioned later in life, it seems to be more difficult to “pass” as a woman, which leads to a lot of pronoun correcting and a sense of being less accepted as a woman.
- Within community issues (several times gay men in the group referred to the transgender women as “he”).
- Transgender people do not feel safe in the shelter system. “It’s a nightmare.”
- “I feel better for the older trans person than for the younger one. The younger trans person is constantly bombarded.”

Several housing-related issues arose. In general, participants felt that housing issues need an LGBT-targeted response, rather than just making mainstream housing programs more LGBT friendly.

- One participant is regularly asked by older LGBT homeless individuals which shelter she recommends, and she doesn’t feel that there is a good answer. The group felt that there really needs to be an LGBT-focused shelter in order to address safety for this population in the shelter system. One participants said, "Like a battered women’s shelter. That kind of safe.”
- The issue of access to affordable housing was discussed – lack of a priority group for LGBT individuals for public housing, being pushed out by families with children, and concern that waitlist processes may be unfair. (There was the perception that some populations – Russian and Chinese seniors - are more successful at working the waitlists than others.)

Public safety issues:

When asked to share experiences when participants felt fearful for their safety or worried that they would be taken advantage of as an LGBT person, participants shared the following stories:

- Threatening environments are particular bus routes (31, 45, 30, 5). On the 31 Balboa, one participant felt that he is targeted by the Latino and African American youth because he is gay, older and White. It can become an “incendiary environment” with increasing risk of assault. The same participant was once attacked on another bus, and ultimately used pepper spray to defend himself. (The participant said that he no longer carries pepper spray or other items for self-defense, but that his cell phone is a source of comfort.)
• Being targeted for being gay, even in the Castro. "Public safety is a joke."
• Experiencing intimidation by the residents of an adjoining flat in a participant’s building. She doesn’t want to give up her apartment, but she has alerted the police about the situation, and there seems to be an increased police presence in the neighborhood following those reports.
• Being targeted as an older person – people stalking a participant’s mailbox when she was still receiving social security checks by mail.

Experiences with the police were mostly positive, but mixed. The participant who had used pepper spray on MUNI described his interactions with the police: the officers wanted to see his permit to use it (which he had), and one officer said, “He has a perfect right to defend himself.” Others discussed the fear or reporting victimization that involved having been shamed for fear of being shamed again by the police (e.g., feeling like the police is asked what you did to become a victim, or assuming that victimization was due to a lover’s spat, or assuming that if you weren’t so flamboyant or obvious about your identity then the incident wouldn’t have happened).

Several people mentioned that most of the LGBT senior community’s problems are economic in nature, including safety.

One participant described having attended the SF Public Defender’s Justice Summit – they didn’t deal much with issues related to the LGBT community.

To a certain degree, there was a feeling among the group that LGBT older adults have to “take care of our own” when it comes to basic needs. For example, one participant described taking it upon himself to help a neighbor whose food delivery was sometimes stolen.

Other issues

One member of the group talked about the importance of doing simple things to make housing better. For example, making sure that the new housing at 55 Laguna would be able to easily have the windows cleaned – you need to be able to see the sun.

The group discussed the importance of follow-up when it comes to recommendations that come out of these kinds of task force processes:

• Tell the story to policy makers, make recommendations, and then follow up.
• Consider having a grand jury level investigative body to which concerns on this topic could be brought and investigated.

Recommendations for outreaching to minority communities:

• Be present at community fairs.
• Show that the task force is successful at getting something done – regain trust. On participant said the attitude is "Why bother?" We’ve been studied many times and nothing happens, and this is especially true at the Housing Authority. "We are forgotten", he added.

Recommendations for other people to contact for input:

1. Pastor Chuck Lewis
2. Pastor Lisle Beckman
3. SF Night Ministry

After the conclusion of this focus group, participants were provided with stamped envelopes addressed to the Department of Aging and Adult Services and encouraged to provide any additional comments by mail. One participant sent the following comments:

• “How does an 'older adult' resident of SF become aware of services, activities, community, etc. specifically designed for the ‘senior’ community, which includes those targeting older LGBTQ individuals? Is there a directory, websites?”

• “I suggest a Speaker’s Bureau of senior LGBTQ individuals because there is much work to be done educating governmental - local, state, and fed - and private industry - large and small employers!”

• “What areas, activities, put our community at greater risk? Bus lines, BART - Mission vs. Bernal Heights?”

• “Is there an office - dept. - in the SFPD assigned to senior LGBT folks? Are crimes against us handled any differently? Does the SFPD know how fragile - what great targets - we - especially trans folks are?”