

The Rhode Island Foundation LGBTQ Elder Care Summit **Briefing**

While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) elders contend with many of the same aging-related issues as their heterosexual counterparts, they face different, often hidden and unmet challenges as well.

In an effort to begin a dialogue about this issue, Equity Action, a field of interest fund of the Rhode Island Foundation, sponsored the first ever LGBTQ Elder Care Summit in the state. On October 31, 2008, over 58 providers, professionals, and policy makers came together to discuss the difficulties faced by aging lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Rhode Islanders. It became clear, through presentations and group discussion, that culturally competent service delivery for seniors in Rhode Island must include LGBTQ issues.

Keynote speaker Patricia Burbank, professor at the University of Rhode Island College of Nursing, gave an overview of the elder LGBTQ population as represented in the literature and from a Rhode Island survey, *Meet the Older Neighbors*, funded by Equity Action. Professor Burbank noted that today's LGBTQ elders grew up in a time when homosexuality was a diagnosable mental illness (until 1974). Most stayed "in the closet" and have remained "in the closet" for fear of discrimination. Adding to this is the lack of rights afforded partners, creating isolation and legal barriers during failing health and upon death.

A panel of experts, facilitated by Sally Ann Hay, MSW, introduced promising practices. Panelists included Michael Adams, executive director of SAGE (Services and Advocates for GLBT Elders) of New York City; Lisa Kimsky, director of the LGBT Aging Project of Massachusetts; and David Aronstein, president of Stonewall Communities of Boston, Massachusetts. These organizations were created to reduce fear and isolation among LGBTQ seniors and improve the quality of life of this underserved group. Panelists offered recommendations and advised the development of a plan with obtainable goals based on identified needs of the community.

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Lt. Governor Elizabeth Roberts spoke of the need for a strong and inclusive safety net for Rhode Island's elders that respects diversity and offers legal protections for all.



A panel discussion showcased successful programs in New York City and Massachusetts put in place to provide training, advocacy, and support services for thousands of LGBTQ elders in these locations.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Patricia Burbank

professor at the University of Rhode Island College of Nursing

FACILITATOR

Sally Ann Hay, MSW

PANELISTS

Michael Adams

executive director of SAGE (Services and Advocates for GLBT Elders) of New York City

Lisa Kimsky

director of the LGBT Aging Project of Massachusetts

David Aronstein

president of Stonewall Communities of Boston, Massachusetts

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Interdisciplinary breakout groups began this work by identifying gaps and obstacles to meeting the needs of LGBTQ elders, making recommendations for action steps/initiatives that could be undertaken in the next five years to improve services and quality of life for this population. Analysis of their discussion identified four core issues and possible supports/resources that could be implemented:



Keynote speaker Patricia Burbank, DNSc, RN, created an informative presentation outlining critical issues for LGBTQ elders. Her PowerPoint is available on the Equity Action website (www.equityaction.org).

Findings from the Meet the Older Neighbors study mirror national data, reflecting a range of challenges for an estimated 12,000 elder Rhode Islanders:

- 27% had no one to care for them if they couldn't care for themselves
- 60% of respondents are not out to their health care providers
- 31% were out to their clergy and of those only 22% felt supported by their clergy
- 35% experienced or witnessed LGBTQ discrimination at some time during the past year.

Lack of LGBTQ friendly elder services, healthcare, housing, social services and workplaces

- Educate service providers and students in professional service programs regarding elder LGBTQ issues
- Educate LGBTQ elders about LGBTQ friendly services and provide community outreach

Lack of legal support and protection of rights for LGBTQ elders

- Lobbying and advocacy for legal rights
- Educate LGBTQ elders about available legal resources

Need for increased spiritual/religious support of LGBTQ elders

- Educate church/spiritual leaders about needs of LGBTQ elders
- Increase care and outreach to LGBTQ elders through community service work provided by religious organizations

Need for sense of community to address isolation and social issues

- Sponsor activities for community building
- Increase intergenerational activities

Organizers of the Summit hope to spur continued discussion, problem solving and resources to address these concerns. For more information go to the Equity Action website at www.equityaction.org.

“It is so important to have caregivers we can trust, particularly as our elders are so very dependent on these folks.”

**Jodi Glass, Au.D., Doctor of Audiology
Elder Care Summit Participant**

Equity Action is a field of interest fund at The Rhode Island Foundation serving LGBTQ communities throughout the state.

For more information about Equity Action contact:

Marie Esposito
Development Officer
The Rhode Island Foundation
One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
(401) 427-4041.
mesposito@rifoundation.org

