

MEET THE OLDER NEIGHBORS WORKSOP

Continuation December 10, 2006

On November 12, 2005 SAGE/RI held a workshop entitled “Meet the Older Neighbors” to present the results of a SAGE/RI sponsored survey which had been funded by the Equity Action Fund, a special interest fund of the Rhode Island Foundation. This workshop attended by approximately thirty (30) LGBT community members offered a power point presentation of the results and analysis of 148 completed questionnaires of LGBT individuals 50 years of age or older living in Rhode Island or bordering communities. A series of workshop sessions on various topics were offered to allow for discussion of salient issues; to develop recommendations based on the survey’s findings and on the experience of those in attendance. This served in part as a focus group follow up to the survey. A second meeting attended by a smaller group of activists and SAGE/RI supporters was held on December 10, 2005 to organize the ideas and suggestions of workshop participants. The following report presents the recommendations that emerged from these meetings.

Topic: Spirituality

The workshop on spirituality generated considerable enthusiasm and engaging discussion. A number of propositions representing many of the views expressed and summarized by workshop scribe Lynn Anderson are presented in Appendix A. Overall, participants were impressed by the diversity of religious views represented, by the tolerant, respectful and accepting attitudes expressed. Essentially, for some an interest in spirituality proved to be an internal process, at times a lonely struggle to identify and actualize core values; for others it focused on relationship, family and community. Still others found spiritual enrichment in nature or beauty or in ethical humanitarian systems of belief. Whether LGBT individuals commit themselves to traditional religious practices or to alternative spiritual paths it is important for the community to find ways to support and enhance their expression of spiritual needs and values. Recommendations for the future were as follows:

- Forums on this topic should be sponsored either by SAGE/RI or under other auspice, given that so many participants expressed an interest in having more time for further discussion. For example, the SAGE/RI Coffee-Chat in February addressed issues of pastoral care and family relationships at times of serious illness and this was publicized in the SAGE/RI newsletter.
- The LGBT community should find ways to increase the visibility of its connection to spiritual and religious traditions. This would help community members seeking more pastoral support. It would also be an effective advocacy strategy for countering those who use or rather misuse religious beliefs and institutions to attack the LGBT community.
- Establish contacts with LGBT affirming clergy and welcoming churches to inform the LGBT community of opportunities for positive involvement. A list of welcoming churches and key contacts among clergy should be developed.
- Acquire a library/ bibliography of LGBT affirming religious and spiritual literature.

- The R.I. State council of churches has been supportive of LGBT civil rights. Perhaps the council could be engaged to present a jointly sponsored workshop or speaking event to promote tolerance and understanding.

Topic: Personal Health and Health Promotion

This workshop combined two broad topics; dealing with health care systems and personal health issues. Participants spoke from their own experiences on the need for LGBT sensitive health care and quality home care. Three major issues were expressed:

- LGBT individuals need information about sensitive and welcoming health care providers as well as a better understanding of government health care programs and policies, such as Medicare Part D.
- There is widespread fear of encountering homophobia and discrimination in hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living facilities as well as on the part of home health care staff. This concern underscores the need for learning how to choose LGBT sensitive providers and facilities and for the provision of sensitivity training for health care and elder network service providers.
- Participants expressed an interest in LGBT dedicated services; a nursing home or assisted living facility specifically for LGBT and gay friendly residents, for example, and for a dedicated ombudsman well versed in gay issues especially for dealing with Long Term Care issues.

Discussion of recommendations focused on the need to partner with other organizations in order to make appropriate resources available. SAGE/RI might partner with the Helpline and with Options in developing a referral list. Youth Pride could perhaps offer advice based on their experience with a mental health provider list. Thundermist Health Center is engaged in in-service training for health care providers on LGBT issues and would benefit from outreach material developed by SAGE/RI. Specific recommendations include the following:

- Develop a resource list of LGBT sensitive and affirming health care providers and elder service network contacts.
- Gather information regarding LGBT related curriculum in local medical, nursing and social work schools. SAGE/RI supporters maintain contacts with local colleges and universities and should be able to obtain useful material.
- Continue pursuing opportunities for outreach and education with the health care and senior service network as conducted by SAGE/RI through grants funded by the R.I. DEA and the R.I. Foundation in recent years. At this point SAGE/RI would need to locate both a funding source, if only for covering expenses, and a qualified trainer or trainers.
- SAGE/RI sponsored seminars and workshops on health related topics and informative newsletter articles. Workshops might be jointly sponsored with AIDS Project R.I. such as the R.I. DEA funded series on AIDS education for older adults, or with Pride or the YWCA. (In March 2006 SAGE/RI carried an article in its newsletter on Medicare Part D and held an informational meeting with expert guest speaker.)

Topic: Coping with Loss and Personal Crisis

This workshop provided an opportunity for those who had suffered a major loss to share their experiences in a supportive setting. Participants addressed the need for intensive emotional support around the loss of a life partner and stressed the importance of community outreach to individuals suffering from isolation, grief and depression. The LGBT community must find intergenerational vehicles for offering support. Useful strategies may include friendly visiting programs; help with chore services and transportation, social activities and bereavement groups. Educational forums for increasing sensitivity both within the LGBT community and among elder service providers should be developed.

Topic: Housing and Community Services

The participants in this workshop expressed an interest in accessing main stream health care, social service and housing resources, but feared prejudice and discrimination. Many voiced uncertainty about what to expect and were unsure of their legal rights. Overall participants did not seem well versed on matters such as Advance Directives, Living Wills, hospital visitation rights and funeral planning. They expressed an interest in becoming better informed of their rights, specifically in regard to legal instruments which would insure access to loved ones and participation in critical decision making around health care issues. It seemed this group placed high value on independence and privacy, and hoped not to become reliant on community based services in the near future. Yet they recognized the importance of these services for helping to sustaining individuals facing impairments due to advancing age or ill health. They identified a need within the LGBT community to learn more about community services and to insure that service providers would be tolerant of and sensitive toward the needs of LGBT elders. There was also an interest in developing LGBT dedicated services. Historical and current exposure to intolerant and hostile attitudes suggested a need for an LGBT advocate or Ombudsman on a state level for helping to resolve issues with service provides and senior housing developments. They placed high value on being able to work with a LGBT social worker or patient advocate in selecting services. Many wanted the community to be able to offer LGBT dedicated services so they could anticipate being cared for by individuals who truly understood the unique experience of being a gay or lesbian and with whom they could celebrate gay culture.

Specific recommendations were as follows:

- Plan a workshop on civil rights especially as they relate to health care, housing and social services and on appropriate legal mechanisms for dealing with end of life issues. Partners might include the LGBT Helpline, R.I. Gay and Lesbian Lawyers Association, the Alliance for Better Long Term Care and R.I. Pride.
- Assist individuals locate attorneys sensitive to LGBT concerns and willing to take on advocacy issues.
- Work with the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs and the Alliance for Better Long Term Care to establish an advocate for LGBT issues at a State agency level or at the Alliance. While there are individuals sensitive to these issues working at these agencies, there is neither formal recognition of LGBT needs nor any visible advocate.

- Hold workshops or seminars on specific health care issues for both men and women, on housing resources and marriage equality. Partner with health centers, housing authorities, the YWCA, and M.E.R.I. etc.
- Publish in the SAGE/RI newsletter articles providing information on social service or health care topics, such as transportation resources or Medicare Part D, for example.
- Submit articles to other community outlets such as the Pride Newsletter or Options.
- Send the SAGE/RI newsletter to senior housing complexes, senior centers and service agencies.
- Conduct training with R.I. Resident Service Coordinators and Senior Center staff to convey information regarding LGBT issues, to promote acceptance of LGBT culture and to reduce incidents of harassment. (A SAGE/RI Steering Committee member started a gay social club at a senior housing development much to the surprise of managers that met with success among LGBT residents and acceptance by others.)
- Consider developing telephone based support networks to promote friendship for sharing rides, attending community activities and to reach geographically isolated elders.
- Make better use of electronic media including the SAGE/RI website. Provide donated personal computers to LGBT elders and disabled individuals. Develop web-based volunteer and resource networks for provision of chore services to frail elders or disabled individuals.
- Establish networks for helping main stream organizations and agencies promote a positive LGBT social awareness through gay themed activities, such as a book club topic or video afternoon.
- Begin to explore community resources both within and outside the LGBT community for developing a LGBT friendly assisted living facilitate congregate or senior housing development and nursing homes.
- Develop both organizational capacity and financial resources for LGBT community center. This goal would enhance quality of life both on an individual and community level and would facilitate many other projects and identified goals.

Topic: Civil Rights – Discrimination

This was a well attended and lively session given high marks on workshop evaluations. The workshop facilitator commented on the activist views expressed by participants, who were experienced with civil rights and protest movements; had overcome life's obstacles and were committed to empowerment. The following concepts and recommendations were discussed:

- The media presents gay culture as youthful, yet many issues facing LGBT elders deserve attention. Of special concern is the lack of legal protections for LGBT partners especially when one partner is ill or dies and the surviving partner is excluded from decisions-making and denied access to financial benefits. Older

- members of the community need to come forward to testify at the State House and to speak out on these important issues in the media.
- SAGE/RI should support elders in coming out both personally and politically. For example, SAGE/RI could sponsor a workshop focused on coming out later in life. Individuals could present their own personal experiences which often has a powerful impact. Inviting political allies and the media would heighten the effectiveness this type of conscious raising experience.
 - LGBT elders should be encouraged to participate in political and activist efforts since groups are more powerful than individuals. Marriage Equality Rhode Island's state house lobbying effort would benefit from the testimony of older LGBT couples. Several SAGE/RI volunteers participate in PFLAG and contribute to Youth Pride. SAGE/RI is a member of the Senior Agenda Consortium, an advocacy coalition working to improve Rhode Island's elder services. Elders and the wider community benefit from intergenerational cooperation and the person power it takes to build coalitions.
 - All workshop participants recognized the value of an LGBT community center which would enhance community cohesiveness and facilitate the achievement of many other goals and objectives. The idea of a LGBT Senior Center was introduced as a way of providing LGBT seniors with a welcoming place to socialize, to obtain access to community services and a vehicle for sponsoring intergenerational activities. It would require researching funding sources, finding a location and developing an organizational structure for staffing and managing the center.
 - Closer alliances should be forged with Gay Friendly Churches such as the United Church of Christ, all seven Unitarian Universalist Churches in R.I., St Peter and Andrew Episcopal Church, the St. Francis Chapel and the United Council of Churches to work in support of a progressive agenda.
 - The need for improved transportation services was mentioned within the context of working more closely with the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs.
 - The use of a website list serve for providing information about gay friendly services and volunteer helpers was suggested. (This recommendation was also identified by the workshop on Housing and Social Service.) In this way members of the community would be able to better utilize the volunteer strength of the LGBT community to meet community needs. Support was expressed for a Friendly Visitor Program.

At the end of the day a report on each session summarized the ideas and suggestions discussed. The workshop facilitator commented on the fact that there were many more goals and objectives identified than could be immediately implemented given available resources, especially person power. SAGE/RI is committed to working to achieve all of these aims over time and to implement as many suggestions as possible in its current activities.

Report from the Workshop: "Meet the Older Neighbors", 12 Nov.2005
Beneficent Congregational Church - Lynn Anderson 12/09/05

1. Spirituality is important to most people and may be developed in many different ways, not limited to established religious traditions.
2. Members of the LGBT community have sometimes experienced a lack of understanding and acceptance on the part of clergy and religious institutions, which nevertheless has not prevented spiritual seeking and growth.
3. Many of have explored and evolved their own belief systems. These include:
 - a. Atheism: spirituality need not be tied to a deity. Spiritual growth may come in other ways such as sensitivity to beauty in nature or development of an individual morality system.
 - b. Pagan God/Goddess traditions: the unity of all life, our "oneness" with all of Nature.
 - c. Buddhism: an open heart and mind: meditation, relationship to Nature.
 - d. 12th Step Programs: a sense of a "higher" power" and one's relationship to this power.
 - e. Organized religions: some have needed to "Take the best, leave the rest".
4. If practicing a religious faith in an organized religion it is possible to work within the organization to bring about reform and reduce discrimination, e.g. Voice of the Faithful (Catholicism), a movement for more control by the laity, a demand for reform within the Church's hierarchy.
5. Religion and spirituality are not automatically synonymous.
6. Tolerance, understanding, compassion and love are considered by many to be components of spirituality.
7. In spite of lack of understanding and acceptance on the part of some clergy and religious communities, many of the LGBT community have continued to grow and evolve as spiritual beings.
8. In letting this be known and shown, further progress can be made in gaining acceptance of our community.