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LOCAL NEWS | class

More Grey, Less Gay

A public forum explores the needs of older gay people. Similar Age-Friendly New York events aim to prepare the city for a doubling of its senior population in two decades

By BILL SCHOELL

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“There’s as much ageism in the LGBT community as there is homophobia in the straight community,” said one resident. Another complained that gay senior organizations place too much emphasis on HIV and AIDS. Someone else noted that the elderly often go back in the closet once they’re in a senior center.

These comments were raised recently during a special forum at the LGBT Center to address the needs of New York’s queer aging population.

On hand to listen and join the discussion was City Council Speaker Christine Quinn. The event was part of a broader program called Age-Friendly New York, launched by the New York Academy of Medicine in partnership with Mayor Bloomberg and the city council. The program’s goal is to prepare the city for an expected doubling of its senior population in the next two decades.

To reach that goal, public forums such as the one at the LGBT Center cull general information from older people about what they need to age healthily and happily. The data and anecdotes will be used to create a set of proposals completed by next spring that will make the city more age-friendly.

Although many of the problems confronting gay seniors are the same as those confronting straight seniors, discrimination and misunderstanding add to the problems for gays. Therefore, the Age-Friendly New York felt it important to include LGBT seniors in the discussion.



At the LGBT Center, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, standing, warned that budget cuts could hamper services for the aging. *Photo: William Alatryste.*

Quinn herself convened the forum to discuss those issues. And she addressed the main challenge in overcoming them: money. Even though she's on board in terms of helping LGBT seniors—Quinn is openly gay—she couldn't promise that services for the aging wouldn't be affected by cuts in the fiscal budget. "We are too dependent on Wall Street," she says. "We are in a recession. Our job is 'how do we find cuts that are fat and not bone?'"

The crowd at The LGBT Center voiced a variety of complaints during the event. There is concern that the laws prohibiting discrimination against gays in New York are not enforced in nursing homes and senior citizen centers. Many gay seniors go to their local center and find neither gay-specific programs nor a gay-friendly atmosphere where they feel comfortable being themselves. Transgender seniors especially feel that few in the Caring for the Aged community are sensitive to their needs.

Many LGBT seniors feel cut off from gay culture because it's difficult for those in outer boroughs to travel to the Village or Chelsea. Once they make the trek, they often encounter a scene that's youth-oriented and exclusive.

Engaging younger people in discussions about aging is a challenge. "People under 40 do not think about getting older," said one woman.

Organizations such as SAGE (Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders) have done much to create a friendly environment for older gays and provide sought-after programs and services. According to SAGE representatives at the forum, many LGBT seniors go back in the closet as they age, and they are five times less likely to take advantage of some city services because they are too afraid of being discriminated against.

In addition, LGBT seniors are twice as likely to live alone as their straight counterparts and four times as likely not to have children who can help them. Although SAGE has four offices in Manhattan, three are in the Village/Chelsea area; the fourth is in Harlem.

A representative of Greenwich House, a community center in the West Village, said that most of the men in the senior program are gay and living in the closet.

Ruth Finkelstein of the New York Academy of Medicine spoke in broader terms of aging need. "Care giving and isolation are the two major aspects of aging in this city. Let's not just talk about services for senior citizens—let's also talk about [problems with] the bus, the subway, the sidewalk, the grocery store. Let's talk about living our lives, our whole, full, complicated, multi-faceted lives while aging." She added that "'Old' is not our only identity."

Concerns for all seniors, including LGBT, range from medical inaccessibility to the fact the benches are becoming scarce on city streets. In addition, seniors often feel that they are invisible to younger people who, terrified of aging themselves, want nothing to do with them.

A few positive trends were also noted at the Age-Friendly New York event. SAGES' Karen Taylor pointed out that their Conference on Aging coming this October will be sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons AARP Office of Diversity.

If you have comments for the Age-Friendly New York Project, contact Ruth Finkelstein at rfinkelstein@nyam.org, agefriendlynyc.org, 212-822-7266; SAGE: info@sageusa.org, 212-741-2247.