



Groups push for help for LGBT senior citizens

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SUMMARY: There will be up to 4 million LGBT seniors by 2030, and inequities in insurance and retirement benefits will leave many financially unstable.

Though often unrecognized as a crucial issue in the struggle for equality, the rapidly increasing number of LGBT people 65 and over threatens to strain ability of service agencies to provide for them.

According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, there are as many as 3 million LGBT senior citizens across the country, and that number is expected to climb as high as 4 million by 2030. Many of these people are without adult children or partners to care for them.

Even if coupled, they may be financially unstable due to lack of access to a partner's Social Security, health insurance or pension benefits.

Twenty percent of people in unmarried same-sex relationships lack health insurance, compared with 10 percent of married people, the Williams Institute at UCLA's law school reported Wednesday.

"This generation includes the LGBT people who came of age with the profound social changes of the 1960s and 1970s," Gerard Koskovich of the American Society on Aging told the San Francisco Chronicle.

"They took part in the gay liberation movement when they were young and they are moving toward old age with expectations that are quite distinct from those of the previous generation of LGBT people, who grew up in an era when discretion was the key to survival," Koskovich said.

Although organizations for older queer people are emerging in major urban centers in New York, California and Florida, LGBT seniors are often at higher risk for isolation, financial difficulties and prejudice from caregivers.

Brian de Vries, a professor of gerontology at San Francisco State University, claims his research indicates that nondisclosure of sexual orientation is widespread and presents another obstacle for LGBT seniors seeking reliable health care.

The North Berkeley Senior Center has become the first senior organization in the Bay Area to earn the certification of "LGBT-friendly" by Lavender Seniors of the East Bay, an LGBT senior group that hopes to compile a nationwide directory of LGBT-friendly senior centers and nursing homes.

"So many of our seniors, especially the older ones, have had negative experiences in health care agencies or in community agencies like senior centers," Lavender Seniors director Barbara Faulkner told the Chronicle.

Across the Bay, San Francisco has funded a social support organization that promotes intergenerational dialogue and helps to keep seniors an integral part of the LGBT community.