

MEMORANDUM

From: Daniel Redman (National Center for Lesbian Rights)
Zoe Polk (San Francisco Human Rights Commission)
Nadia Babella (San Francisco Human Rights Commission)
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To: San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Seniors Task Force
Date: October 9, 2012
Re: REPORT: "Setting the Agenda: A Community Meeting about Issues Facing LGBT Seniors of Color"

"If we're integrated at the beginning of this process, we've all made some mistakes in the past, but let's move forward. We have a lot to offer."

-Local LGBT activist Larry Saxxon

Introduction

This report gives an account of "Setting the Agenda: A Community Meeting about Issues Facing LGBT Seniors of Color." This report provides: a short review of the unique issues facing LGBT elders of color; the structure of the meeting; comments about the task force by Supervisor Wiener and Supervisor Olague; thoughts by attendees about how to create an inclusive Task Force; and specific comments and suggestions for each of the five working groups (housing, social services, legal equity, research and demographics, and community-within-community).

Issues facing LGBT elders of color

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) elders come from every community. For the members of the Task Force to succeed and propose meaningful policy changes that will benefit all LGBT elders, they must purposefully explore the challenges that LGBT elders of diverse identities face on account of race, class, gender, disability, religion and national origin.

For LGBT elders of color, issues of cultural competence, poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and linguistic accessibility are particularly acute. Safety is a key concern. As one gay elders said, "[It is important to me to] find out who else, as an African American, same-gender-loving person, has used the services," before using a service provider, or attending a meeting or event.¹ While LGBT elders overall are more likely to be poor than their straight peers, LGBT elders of color fare worse across the board.² People of color continue to be disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to the Center for American Progress, "The glaring health inequities revealed by the distribution of HIV/AIDS demonstrate that race is a social index of isolation and impoverishment, disregard, and disempowerment rather than a proxy for divergent sexual attitudes or behaviors..."³ For communities further isolated by linguistic barriers, outreach efforts and friendly services can be tough to find.

¹ Daniel Redman and Imani Woody, "Creating a Safe Harbor for African-American LGBT Elders," *Aging Today*, Jul-Aug 2012, <http://www.asaging.org/blog/creating-safe-harbor-african-american-lgbt-elders>

² U.S. Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans*, 2008, at 11.

³ Center for American Progress, "HIV/AIDS Inequality: Structural Barriers to Prevention, Treatment, and Care in Communities of Color," 2012, at 2, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/07/pdf/hiv_community_of_color.pdf

The organizers of “Setting the Agenda: A Community Meeting about Issues Facing LGBT Seniors of Color” aimed to put these issues front and center for the Task Force. The diversity of LGBT communities is a huge strength, and to serve all LGBT elders, all of us must be at the table and on the agenda.

The structure of the meeting

The *Setting the Agenda* meeting took place on July 26, 2012 from 2pm-4pm in the Audre Lorde Room of the Women’s Building (3543 18th Street). Elders, activists, government officials, and service providers gathered to share testimony and discuss key issues and challenges facing LGBT seniors of color in San Francisco. Approximately 70 people attended.⁴

Zoe Polk and David Miree of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission moderated the discussion. Nadia Babella (San Francisco Human Rights Commission) and Daniel Redman (National Center for Lesbian Rights) acted as clerks for the meeting. Commissioner Michael Pappas (San Francisco Human Rights Commission) provided important planning assistance. Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP) filmed the event and will make an edited version available. Funding for the room and filming were provided by the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Approximately ten people rose to speak and share personal accounts and thoughts. Zoe Polk and David Miree then moderated a discussion using the following prompt questions:

- 1) How can we ensure that LGBT elder of color issues remain front and center as the City embraces LGBT elder issues more broadly?
- 2) What is the greatest challenge facing LGBT elders of color in your community / constituency regarding housing?
- 3) What are the greatest challenges facing LGBT elders of color regarding accessing vital social services, including senior centers, in-home care and government benefits?
- 4) What are the different ways that LGBT elders of color are facing discrimination?
- 5) Do you have any ideas for how to do better outreach to ensure that LGBT elders of color are counted in demographic research?
- 6) What needs to be done to more fully include LGBT elders of color in the broader LGBT community? How can we make the community more inclusive? What programs or changes could help?

Supervisors’ Remarks

Supervisor Scott Wiener (District 8) and Supervisor Christina Olague (District 5) spoke about the importance of diversity to the newly-established LGBT Elder Task Force. Sup. Wiener emphasized that the Task Force must be diverse in terms of “gender, ethnic background, and all the categories and ways that our community is diverse.” He emphasized that “we want to make sure that all perspectives are represented on this Task Force.” Sup. Olague highlighted the importance of the San Francisco queer community to LGBT seniors. “So many of us feel a need to be here, it’s where we’re able to be who we are.” The Supervisors brought copies of the application and urged attendees to apply.

⁴ Heather Cassell, “LGBT seniors of color speak out,” Bay Area Reporter, Aug 2, 2012, <http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=67928>.

Creating an inclusive Task Force

To succeed, the Task Force needs a diverse membership and a plan for ensuring participation and input from diverse communities. Attendees suggested several ways to accomplish this. Activist and former City Hall staffer Larry Saxxon praised the Task Force organizers' desire to expand the Task Force beyond the traditional gay white male power structure. "You redefine the nature of what this community is by demanding that the constitution of this group be truly diverse...That would be a major political shift." Jazzie Collins, an activist with the Senior Action Network recommended that—from the beginning—the Task Force should make a point to go out into the community for input. For instance, the 6th Street corridor in the Tenderloin has a significant LGBT community with much to share. Once the Task Force is established, liaisons to various community groups should be designated and supported. If diversity is not achieved at first, gerontology professor Marty Martinson recommended reserving the option "to go back out and do targeted outreach until the diversity is there."

Know-your-rights: Housing and Legal Equity

As Supervisor Olague pointed out, housing is one of "the most basic needs for our seniors. Sometimes the choice is between paying for the rent or for vital services." Attendees recommended several ways to help elders protect their rights.

First, attendees strongly suggested targeted outreach to ensure that community members know their rights in the first place. There are strong laws in California protecting against discrimination in housing, and the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development has instituted significant new protections—particularly for transgender and gender-nonconforming people. The Task Force should maintain a connection to NCLR Federal Policy Director Maya Rupert in order to communicate specific needs to federal officials. Rupert emphasized that LGBT elder housing issues are a top priority for the Obama Administration. Aside from discrimination, attendees also urged the Task Force to prioritize efforts to publicize and expand existing programs that aim to assist renters, landlords, and home-owners in making their homes more accessible.

Second, attendees also discussed discrimination in residential facilities—raising several important points. Rev. Roland Stringfellow of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the Pacific School of Religion emphasized outreach to communities of faith. He urged the Task Force to develop new enforcement and compliance mechanisms to assure equal treatment in facilities and housing for seniors that are operated by religious institutions. "A lot of discrimination that LGBT African-Americans face is within our own faith community, and those issues need to be addressed," says Jazzie Collins.

Stringfellow also spoke about the curricula he created with the Coalition for Welcoming Congregations for faith communities of color. He has developed programs for API, Latino, and African-American faith communities. In addition, Stringfellow and others organized a conference in 2011 around LGBT aging and communities of faith. We must, in Stringfellow's words, "open people's eyes to the fact that these [LGBT] folks are not outside the church, but in the pews."

Also emphasizing the needs of seniors in care facilities, Craig Wingate of the Alzheimer's Association urged the Task Force to develop stricter compliance mechanisms to assure LGBT-friendly care for seniors with Alzheimer's or dementia. For people with dementia in long-term care facilities, Wingate said, family members and loved ones are sometimes afraid to advocate because they fear it will put their loved one in harm's way.

In addition, attendees emphasized the fragility and thinness of some elders' social networks. For many LGBT elders, this is due to the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. Task Force members should prioritize addressing the impact of lack of legal recognition on families of choice and devise ways to shore up and support existing networks among LGBT elders.

Outreach: Social Services and Research & Demographics

For social services and data collection to be truly inclusive, attendees emphasized the importance of: effective outreach, inclusive and well-trained providers, and strong safeguards against discrimination. To do this, services must be linguistically and culturally competent, providers must build partnerships with existing community structures, and they must acknowledge diverse religious and spiritual traditions.

Dion Wong of Gay Asian Pacific Alliance (GAPA) spoke about the needs of the diverse API LGBT community, and many of his points are also applicable to non-API communities. First, Wong emphasized that outreach workers must acknowledge the varying levels of English fluency among API and other immigrant communities (for example, native Filipino and Singaporean immigrants are much more likely to be fluent in English). He requested that service providers hire and make available more individuals with foreign language competency in professional vocabularies for law, medicine, and other fields. Wong urged the development of linguistically and culturally competent know-your-rights resources.

Wong also highlighted opportunities for outreach with media outlets that serve immigrant communities and communities of color. For many new immigrants, Wong said, these are primary sources of news and information. Working with allies to publish an article or series of articles on LGBT elder issues would have a significant impact, since LGBT issues are rarely if ever covered.

Aside from language barriers, Wong highlighted two important facts to keep in mind when crafting outreach strategies. First, in certain API immigrant communities there is a stigma around discussing sickness. Service providers and health care workers should incorporate this understanding in exam procedures and intake in order to not miss important information. In addition, Wong emphasized that many API LGBT elders cannot or will not come out. This is not an issue just for API LGBT elders, but very common among LGBT elders as whole. A survey of LGBT elders across the nation, for example, revealed that only 22% felt they could be out in a long-term care facility.⁵

Larry Saxxon spoke about his experiences doing HIV/AIDS outreach with the African-American LGBT community, and he emphasized the importance of publicizing culturally competent services. "When word went out that there's one of us at the foundation, I had black clients lined up down the block. Had it not been that I had one colleague who was a Euro-American lesbian who was culturally competent," they could not have handled the influx of people.

These broader cultural competency tips also apply to conducting effective data collection. M.V. Ancil, an activist in the Two-Spirit community, suggested offering free lunches to people with whom you want to talk. In addition, outreach workers should always be mindful of the stresses that low-income people

⁵ Natl Senior Citizens Law Center, et al., "Stories from the Field," at 6 (2011), http://www.lgbtlongtermcare.org/wp-content/uploads/NSCLC_LGBT_report.pdf

face due to poverty. “Whenever I go to the reservation, I always come on the first of the month because people have money and they can offer you tea and coffee. At the end of the month, they’re ashamed that they have nothing to offer you.”

Community-within-community

Many attendees shared strong feelings about the desire to build a better and more inclusive LGBT community—with room for elders, people of color, people of faith, and people with disabilities.

Activist Larry Saxxon spoke about his negative experiences in the Castro neighborhood. “[My partner and I] go out to the Castro now, and we feel like strangers in a strange land...I feel like a dinosaur in this community.” In addition, many attendees spoke about a desire for more opportunities to build intergenerational community. “I want to share my experiences with the community, about my coming out. I have no medium to share this with young people,” says Larry Saxxon. There is also a sense that elders have insight to share about their experiences during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. The Bay Area, in fact, hosts several small but important intergenerational projects, and the Task Force should explore ways to expand and support these efforts.⁶

Conclusion

The organizers and attendees of *Setting the Agenda* hope that this information will be useful to the Task Force as it begins its important work. There are several ideas in this report that are immediately actionable and very necessary to ensure a successful Task Force. Most importantly, the meeting highlighted the enthusiasm and creativity of the community and particularly LGBT communities of color to work together to solve the problems facing LGBT elders in our City.

⁶ Daniel Redman, “Can Intergenerational Connection Battle Ageism Within the LGBT Community?” *Aging Today*, Mar-Apr 2012, <http://www.asaging.org/blog/can-intergenerational-connection-battle-ageism-within-lgbt-community>