

Exploring the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders in Metro Detroit

By:

Curtis Lipscomb, Executive Director of KICK | curtislipscomb@e-kick.org | www.e-kick.org

Kathleen LaTosch, Co-Chair of the LGBT Older Adult Coalition | klatosch@gmail.com | www.lgbtolderadults.com

Since the mid-2000s there's been a lot of interest in Metro Detroit about what's happening to and for our lesbian, gay, bi and transgender (LGBT) older adults. And there's good reason for it. There are an estimated 22,000 LGBT elders, ages 65 and better, living in Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties right now. Another 20,000 will hit the 65-year-old mark by 2020. This tidal wave of aging baby boomers, known by mainstream aging service providers as the "Silver Tsunami", also comes in lavender and teal.

In the spring of last year, Healing Detroit and the LGBT Older Adult Coalition both simultaneously hosted dialogues about this emerging issue. Healing Detroit is an African-American LGBT initiative developed to address barriers and social constraints that impact the growth and development of Detroit's African-American LGBT community. The LGBT Older Adult Coalition was formed in 2010 to address the needs of LGBT older adults and includes members of the Adult Well-Being Services, Affirmations, Area Agency on Aging 1-B, KICK, Citizens for Better Care, The Jim Toy Community Center, MediLodge of Southfield, and Oakland Family Services. In April of 2010, Healing Detroit and the LGBT Older Adult Coalition coordinated elder summits that sought to gather input from LGBT elders on their experiences and concerns about aging in this region. One attracted a mainly Caucasian audience from the suburbs, while the other targeted and attracted primarily a City of Detroit, African American audience. This article presents the findings of both, with a special emphasis placed on exploring the similarities and differences faced by each of these segments of the LGBT aging community and a goal of informing the development of services that will most effectively serve their diverse needs. In writing this, we of course realize that there are many more segments of the LGBT aging community that also need to be explored.

Often times the unspoken definition of "the LGBT community" defaults to the dominant or majority culture, and as is common in Metro Detroit, this can mean white and suburban. By writing this article together, we challenge readers to think about the LGBT community as a broad and diverse cross-section of our Metro Detroit region's population. We remind service providers and community members that in order to properly serve the needs of our LGBT elders, we need to paint a vibrant picture that will consider and include the needs of all our LGBT elders, not a monochromatic one that could leave 40% of the population out in the cold.

The Detroit Summit

The Healing Detroit committee organized this event under the initial fiduciary of SPICE (*Sistahs Providing Intelligence, Creativity, and Empowerment*), a southeast regional African American support group for women; and later by KICK - The Agency for LGBT African Americans. Per the original project proposal, the purpose of the initial 2008 summit was to address issues that hinder growth in the community; increase collaborative partnership building; and educate and increase awareness of non-profit management among Detroit's African American LGBT community. Fifty-three African American LGBT persons who were representatives and/or activists from twenty-three identified African American LGBT service providers and/or grassroots organizations came together in February 2008 for a weekend summit in Ann Arbor, MI. Some of those organizations in attendance were AIDS Partnership Michigan, Ruth Ellis Center, KICK and Black Pride Society. Thus, Healing Detroit developed its foundation through this forum as a single voice to address African American LGBT issues in Detroit. After a heated and an emotional two days of confessions, revelations and thought provoking discussion, leadership from these organizations agreed to work together to focus on problem solving; collaboration in the community; a communication platform to outreach and educate the African American LGBT community; and to improve all of the organizations. Another summit occurred in the fall in Detroit to follow up on tasks initiated in the winter retreat.

Healing Detroit's goal in 2009 was to provide one meeting per quarter. These meetings, hosted by a different organization each quarter, included: issues discussion; nonprofit training and workshops to improve capacity building and infrastructure among African American LGBT organizations; and organizational updates thus improving the kinds of resources that would be available for consumers in Detroit's African American LGBT community. During this summit, there was a collective call by the participants to have the 2010 summit focus on three areas of community development: youth, faith and elders.

The Healing Detroit Elder Summits were held on two days: Saturday and Sunday, April 16 & 17 at the Liberal Arts Gallery located on Gratiot Ave (at Mack Ave) and facilitated by Dr. J. Frederick Bland. The Summit targeted Detroit area African American lesbians, gay, bi and transgender and questioning people 55 and older. The summits included women and men ranging in ages from 22 through 50. Before and during the summit, there were surveys passed out to each attendee and collected by the end of the summit. The survey results were then counted and tabulated. As a result 30% of elders surveyed felt that the lack of employment is the greatest issue plaguing the community, 24% selected crime, 18% selected a need for more LGBT services, and 16% selected an overall greater need for city services.

On day one, Dr. Bland introduced the elder summit mission and history. He later introduced the summit organizers and panel members of Detroit's LGBT community organizers: Johnny Jenkins (co-founder of Hotter Than July), Cornelius Wilson (co-founder of Men of Color), Robert Tate (co-founder of the BBC - Billionaires Boys Club), and Andrea Wilson (executive director of SPICE). There was a consensus throughout the room that all the progressive organizations that are in

existence today would not exist without some of the area institutions in Detroit's LGBTQ community which consisted of BBC (lead by Robert Tate), Men of Color (lead by Cornelius Wilson), KICK! Magazine (lead by Curtis Lipscomb), Women of A Current Affair (lead by June Washington) and the "Family" group (leaders unknown).

In addition on day one, Dr. Bland introduced the panel members in what was described as the "Elder Life Enhancement Seminar" which included:

- **Dr. Raphael Bostic**, special assistant, Office of Policy Development and Research, Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- **Dr. Joel Milliner MD**, resident physician for the Michigan Department of Corrections and Visiting Physicians Group
- **Adrienne C. Watts**, attorney, Law Office of Adrienne C. Watts
- **Sgt. Myron Travis and Officer Dale Dorsey**, Detroit Police Department from Central District
- **Roosevelt E. Grayson**, vice president, Investments Financial Advisor, Chase

Day two started with Dr. Bland recapping day one's discussion and summary. Some examples of fact-findings that impact men and women 55 and over in the LGBTQ community were shown in a power point presentation and a fishbowl discussion was led where two circles were formed: in the inner circle was the LGBT Elders 50+ and on the outer line of the circle was the next generation.

Some of the findings include:

- Mature LGBTQ people are isolated by their community and that their peers are self-afflicted.
- Mature LGBTQ people if left to be in a senior living facility are most likely sent back into the closet.
- The LGBTQ community is so youth oriented that women and men 55 and over does not relate to the social network that is geared toward LGBTQ youth.
- Women and men 55 and over, that are financially and career successful, seem to be more self-isolated in their years of education and career climbing because of the lack of a push of partnership and community network building.
- LGBTQ women and men 55 and over of today that have lived in an isolated lifestyle don't communicate well when it comes to life issues. Such as physical illness, financial troubles and personal relationships.
- The new baby boomer community also includes women and men 55 and over whose lifestyles are not usually setup economically for their final years as their same gender loving counter parts.

The Ferndale Summit

On April 6, 2011, the LGBT Older Adult Coalition convened two sessions to solicit feedback from LGBT older adults. The day was facilitated by Shea Howell, an instructor at Oakland University and active member in the local LGBT community. Each session began with a panel of older adults sharing their thoughts and fears about aging and was followed by break-out sessions where participants discussed their greatest concerns about aging. After a large group report-out, participants were asked to rank their concerns, creating a clear prioritization of needs. Between the afternoon and evening sessions which were offered to provide accessibility to working older adults, the program included a complimentary meal and legal rights presentation delivered by the ACLU of Michigan. In total, there were 54 participants in the afternoon session and 21 in the evening session.

Evaluations for both sessions captured information on age and retirement status. There were significant differences between the afternoon and evening participants. Nearly three-quarters of afternoon participants were over 60 while only half of the evening participants were over 60. Seventy percent of the afternoon participants were retired with only 41 percent of evening participants retired. There were also differences in how each group prioritized their concerns as a member of the LGBT older adult population and this may be an indication that concerns vary and change according to age.

The older and more-likely-to-be-retired-group who attended the afternoon session identified three top concerns: Isolation (45%); Healthcare affordability (38%); and LGBT competent care (14%). Specifically, people discussed the fear of being alone, the lack of social programs available for LGBT older adults, and the lack of family support to assist in their care-giving. Healthcare affordability concerns centered on how to pay for in-home care without a partner. Lastly, many were concerned about the lack of LGBT-training and awareness among healthcare providers, including nursing facilities and long-term care homes.

The younger audience with a higher percentage of working adults who attended the evening session, cited three top concerns: housing (45%); independence (26%); and isolation (18%). Nearly half of all those with housing concerns were interested in creating LGBT housing options. Independence was characterized by concerns over losing access to transportation and losing the ability to care for oneself at home. On isolation, many were concerned about the lack of social programs available and feared isolation from friends and community members.

Similarities & Differences

In reviewing the summaries of both summits, there are some clear similarities to both the Caucasian suburban LGBT elders and the African American Detroit-based LGBT elders. Elders from both groups cited the following concerns:

- **General Social Isolation.** There are a number of factors at play regarding isolation. First, social connections among LGBT communities in Southeastern Michigan tend to focus on providing outlets for younger members of the community. Older adults often feel unwelcome at these events and activities. This is particularly true of the gay men's communities where there is a

strong emphasis on image and youthfulness. Second, many LGBT older adults fear social ostracism within the mainstream senior social community based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and will outright avoid these connection options out of emotional and social safety. Both groups cited a need for more LGBT older adult services.

- Senior Living Communities not welcoming for LGBT elders. LGBT older adults in both summits discussed the need for LGBT affirming housing options and feared having to return to the closet upon moving into a facility –due to staff and/or neighbor bias. In fact, many are afraid of being mistreated or abused by direct care workers or shunned and stigmatized by other residents. Many older adults could easily cite examples of friends “going back to the closet” upon moving into a retirement community or other elder housing service.
- Financial Stability. Older Adults from both summits discussed their concerns about healthcare and housing affordability. This concern is exacerbated by the fact the LGBT older adults are more likely to live in poverty than their heterosexual counterparts and do not have the financial protection afforded to heterosexual, married couples such as social security sharing, pension access and waived inheritance taxes.

The most significant difference identified between these two groups was that African American older adults living in the city had concerns specifically revolving around living in Detroit as an LGBT elder, whereas Caucasians did not so much cite their town or city as a significant issue – beyond a concern of general isolation. Concerns for African American older adults living in Detroit are compounded by the challenges facing all city residents.

In particular, Detroit-based African Americans are concerned with unemployment - it was cited as the greatest concern. This is consistent with national data which shows African Americans are much more likely to be unemployed and living in poverty than Caucasians due to systemic racial equity issues. African Americans in Detroit were also concerned about city-specific issues such as crime and a greater need for city services. Few, if any, Caucasian suburban older adults cited concerns related to their specific town or city. Instead, concerns focused on LGBT cultural competent care in healthcare and questions about future housing options.

Next Steps

As we look to effectively address the needs of our LGBT older adults in Metro Detroit, it's important to recognize that various segments within the LGBT community have different needs and wants. Continuing to learn from our community members and then working to collectively provide information and services that address their needs is paramount.

This year, the LGBT Older Adult Coalition and the Detroit Elder Project at KICK are teaming up to host one unified summit to address the top priorities as cited in last year's summits. On Saturday, June 23rd, both organizations are co-hosting the 2012 LGBT Older Adult Summit at the MSU – Detroit Center on Woodward in Detroit. The event will feature several workshops and panels addressing isolation, healthcare, finances, and employment.

