

Invisible No More: The Importance of Asking Demographic Questions Inclusive of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity



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I first started working to support the inclusion of older lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people in 2008. Walking into a room of aging service professionals was very uncomfortable in the beginning. I would look around the room and quickly assess that I was probably the only lesbian in the room (or the only out lesbian). In networking spaces, we would go around and introduce ourselves and our organization. At times, I was tempted to simply say that I worked for SAGE and move on. Yet, I knew it was important to say SAGE, where we provide services and advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender elders. I recall vividly the look of surprise on people's faces when they heard me say lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The room became just as uncomfortable for them as it was for me. After the meetings people would often remark how they don't have any LGBTQ+ elders in their community or they think they might have served a lesbian once. I knew this was not true. LGBTQ+ elders live in all communities, large and small, across the country. We were simply invisible to the Aging Network – because no one was asking the questions to truly get to know us and our needs


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I knew from these early encounters that I had to continue to show up. In order for older LGBTQ+ people to truly have access to the same services as their neighbors, we could no longer be invisible. The only way to ensure we are not invisible is for the Aging Network to create a space where we can share about who we are and what our service needs are. The process of getting to know our constituents begins with the intake or service assessment. One key commonality among every intake or service assessment is the demographic questions. Historically absent have been sexual

orientation and gender identity (SOGI) questions. This absence has perpetuated the narrative of assumptions – assumptions that when a person talks of their spouse, that they are in a heterosexual relationship. Some people assume that they can guess a person’s gender or gender identity by their name, mannerisms, or the way they dress or talk. When assumptions are made, we neglect to see the uniqueness in each person. We neglect to fully understand their needs and how we can best serve them.

I am grateful to see the work being done today with the leadership of the Administration for Community Living to begin collecting data on sexual orientation and gender identity. I have enjoyed working with the SMP/SHIP/MIPPA programs across the country to provide training and technical assistance for counselors and volunteers to ask inclusive SOGI questions. Yet, I know, some people remain uncomfortable with asking SOGI questions. If you are uncomfortable, I am here to say I see you and I understand.

I reflect back on the first time I worked at an Area Agency on Aging as an intern and part of my job was to provide intakes over the phone. I remember feeling uncomfortable when asking about a person’s race or income. I admit that sometimes I would simply skip over the questions because I did not feel comfortable. My uneasiness and discomfort served no one and actually did a disservice to the caller. I had not provided them with the opportunity to tell their story. The important demographic data would help the agency know they were reaching community members that may be in greatest need.



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SAGE is committed to continue this journey with you. Every SMP/SHIP/MIPAA team member has the opportunity to take part in free-of-charge training provided by [SAGECare](#) and the [SAGE National Resource Center on LGBTQ+ Aging](#). The training, Supporting LGBTQ+ Older Adults and Asking Inclusive Intake Questions, is designed to provide a basic level of cultural competency to support you as you work to meet the needs of all the people who contact your office for support. We also have best practice guides that will further your understanding, including [Inclusive Questions for Older Adults: A Practical Guide to Collecting Data on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#) and [Inclusive Services for LGBT Older Adults: A Practical Guide to Creating Welcoming Agencies](#). Feel free to download and share these guides with others in your network.

The Aging Network has come a long way since I first began this work 16 years ago. We know more and more LGBTQ+ elders are

seeking out the supports and services you offer and, as our tagline at SAGE says, We Refuse to Be Invisible. Demographic questions are the key to knowing who your organization is reaching and, more importantly, who you are not. If the demographic data shows an absence of LGBTQ+ people being served, then we know that more work needs to be done to create a welcoming and supportive environment – to strengthen outreach efforts and ensure that our LGBTQ+ older neighbors have access to the services they need.

More Resources

These resources are available in the SMP and SHIP resource libraries:

- Demographic Data Collection
- Building Skills and Confidence in Demographic Data Collection Webinar 