



TRAINING THE AGING NETWORK  
TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY  
COMPETENT CARE FOR LGBTQ  
OLDER ADULTS

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## **Acknowledgments**

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# Introduction: Why Providing Culturally Competent Care to LGBTQ Older Adults is Important

Today's world is much more open and accepting of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ)<sup>1</sup> people, but many LGBTQ older people have lived through decades of discrimination, unequal treatment and violence, all because they are LGBTQ. This means that they may decide that it is safer to stay in the closet, or go back into the closet, when seeking health and social services. They may hide their relationships, not discuss their real health questions, or put off routine or preventative care because they are afraid of how they will be treated. A 2014 survey by SAGE found that 40 percent of LGBTQ older adults say that their health care providers do not know they are LGBTQ, and 65 percent of transgender older adults are afraid that they will have limited access to health care as they grow older.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly true today when many LGBTQ people feel that the climate is becoming more hostile to them. The LGBTQ advocacy group GLAAD has found that from 2014-2017, increasing numbers of Americans said they were comfortable with LGBTQ people. But 2018 marked the first year that this trendline reversed, with comfort decreasing and, disturbingly, LGBTQ people reported experiencing more discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

A recent AARP survey of LGBTQ members found that more than eight in ten respondents say they would feel more comfortable with providers who are specifically trained in LGBTQ patient needs (88 percent), that use advertising to highlight LGBTQ-friendly services (86 percent), have some staff members who are LGBTQ themselves (85 percent), or display LGBTQ-welcoming signs or symbols in facilities and online (82 percent).<sup>4</sup>



## How SAGECare Works

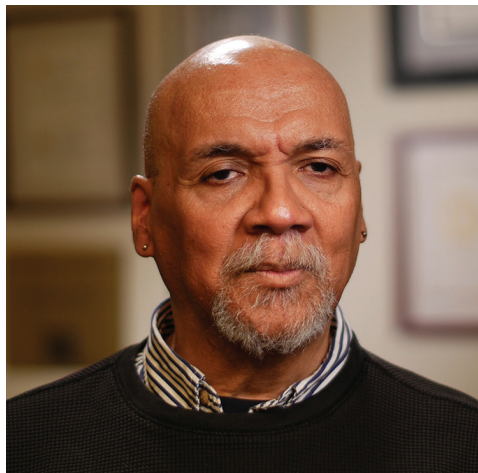
In 2010, SAGE developed a program to provide cultural competency training to aging service providers, to assist them in understanding the unique needs of LGBTQ older adults. It began as a pilot program through a grant from the Administration on Aging,<sup>5</sup> a federal agency that works to keep older adults at home and in their communities, as well as to address health disparities among marginalized groups, including LGBTQ older adults. Evaluation results from the pilot program showed significant improvements in training participants' knowledge and attitudes about how to make an environment more sensitive to LGBTQ elders.<sup>6</sup> The program is now called SAGECare and offers credentials to organizations that meet certain training requirements.

The goal of cultural competency training is to provide staff of aging service organizations with the information they need to provide person-centered care attuned to the unique needs and perspectives of their LGBTQ older adult clients. Led by SAGECare staff or certified regional trainers, most SAGECare cultural competency training programs include a combination of the following topics:

## Quick Facts about SAGECare

- SAGECare provides cultural competency training on LGBTQ aging issues to service providers.
- Training is available in English, Spanish and Cantonese.
- As of 2018, SAGECare has trained over 50,000 service providers.
- There are 336 SAGECare credentialed providers in 46 states.

- **Key terminology**, including which terms are affirming and which terms are offensive, with sensitivity to negative associations that may be generation-specific for older LGBTQ people.
- **The history of the LGBTQ experience** and how it impacts a person's willingness to come out. For many LGBTQ older adults, staying in the closet was vital to keeping their job, their housing and for their personal safety.
- **The intersection of LGBTQ identity and other identities** such as race, ethnicity, ability, religion, immigration experience or class. Being LGBTQ and African American, or an LGBTQ immigrant, or an LGBTQ Muslim are all very different experiences, and person-centered care requires taking these various threads of identity into account.
- **Ways to avoid making assumptions** that people are not LGBTQ. For example, many providers may assume that two women are friends or roommates, not understanding that they are partners. Providers may also mistakenly assume that anyone with grandchildren is heterosexual or not transgender.
- **Common and incorrect stereotypes about LGBTQ people**, such as the misperception that LGBTQ people are affluent, more promiscuous than other people, or that they do not have children or grandchildren.
- **Research into specific health needs and disparities faced by LGBTQ people**, such as higher rates of hypertension, tobacco and alcohol use, and the long-term impacts of hormone replacement therapy.



SAGECare offers aging service organizations a variety of training options. It offers one-hour trainings (in-person or web-based) to staff on how to be genuinely welcoming to LGBTQ people and families. It also offers four-hour in-person training for administrators to help them create communities that are genuinely inclusive and build on the diversity and strength of both the staff and the older adults being served. SAGECare also offers a credentialing program for organizations that have trained significant percentages of their staff. For example, Platinum level providers have 80 percent of their employees trained in the 1-hour program and 80 percent of their administrators trained through the 4-hour program. Credentialed organizations have ongoing training and reporting requirements.

## Case Example: Visiting Nurse Service of New York

For 125 years, (Visiting Nurse Service of New York) VNSNY has cared for New Yorkers of all backgrounds. The organization began as a group of nurses who visited the tenement houses of New York City's Lower East Side, providing essential health care services to an impoverished immigrant community. Today, with over 13,000 employees, VNSNY touches more than 48,000 lives across the New York metropolitan area on any given day, providing a wide range of services that include in-home nursing, rehabilitation therapy and social work support, in-home hospice care, home health aide services, community mental health care, and an array of Medicaid and integrated Medicare-Medicaid health plans.

While it has grown significantly over the decades, VNSNY has never wavered in its focus on caring for the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including New York City's LGBTQ community. VNSNY nurses were among the first health care providers to identify signs of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1970s, and routinely provided home care to AIDS patients at a time when other health care providers often held back due to fear and misinformation. More recently, VNSNY was one of the first New York City health care organizations to provide specialized home nursing care for patients following gender affirmation surgery.

Despite its record of caring for New York's LGBTQ community, VNSNY wanted to provide more structured support to its LGBTQ patients, clients and plan members – particularly its older LGBTQ patients. “The light bulb went off when we were meeting with the transgender surgery team at Mount Sinai Beth Israel to discuss our post-surgical care program,” recalls Richard Rothstein, VNSNY's Vice President of Enterprise Communications, who also heads up VNSNY's internal LGBTQ Advocacy Group. “They asked if we were an official preferred provider for the LGBTQ community – and in fact, we weren't. We looked around then, and we realized that, with an estimated 750,000 LGBTQ seniors living in New York City, no home care organization was addressing the critical needs of LGBTQ elders with any real focus or commitment. Everything was being done in a sort of ad hoc way.”

VNSNY also understood that taking a more formal approach to ensuring a safe home care environment for LGBTQ elders would represent an important step toward overcoming health disparities in this community. “Today's LGBTQ seniors belong to a generation that has often experienced prejudice from



health care providers as well as general community service providers such as nutritional and adult day care centers over the years,” notes Mr. Rothstein. “They have a fear of being harassed and discriminated against in the health care and social services system. And at the same, they often have less of a personal support system than the straight community in terms of family and surviving friends.”

Determined to fill this gap, VNSNY reached out to SAGE to discuss providing SAGECare training to its employees. “There was never any question that SAGE was the right organization to do the training,” adds Mr. Rothstein. “They are the experts – the nation's largest and oldest organization providing multidimensional services to gay seniors.”

*“The SAGE training has helped me provide better care to my LGBTQ patients. It's made me feel more comfortable and understanding about my patients' needs. In turn, my comfort level has helped build more trust in my relationship with my patients.”*

— Fenella Wharton, VNSNY  
Partners in Care Home Health Aide  
and Care Coordinator

Given the size of VNSNY's workforce, VNSNY and the SAGECare team decided to implement the training in stages, starting with its hospice division, which serves approximately 1,000 patients at any one time. They chose this division, in part, because the end-of-life care provided by interdisciplinary hospice teams calls for special sensitivity and emotional support. "The whole goal of LGBTQ competency training is to provide a safe, welcoming and comforting environment for our patients and plan members, and nowhere is this sense of safety more important than at the end of life," explains Mr. Rothstein. "We wanted to make sure we were providing the best quality and best practices for end-of-life care and comfort to LGBTQ patients who are in that phase of their lives."

Starting in the fall of 2015, the entire VNSNY Hospice staff went through the SAGECare cultural competency course, which includes an overview of LGBTQ history as well as case studies and in-depth discussions about the importance of respectful language. "Being LGBTQ is not a 'lifestyle,' which implies that someone chooses to be gay, and to call it that is offensive," notes Mr. Rothstein. The training also emphasized the importance of not making assumptions. "If a nurse or therapist walks into a gay man's home and asks, 'Where is your wife?' that patient is then put in a position of either coming out on the spot, or shutting down," Mr. Rothstein added. "And if they shut down, they are not going to be able to fully access the health care they need."

Over three years, VNSNY and SAGE have expanded the training to VNSNY's home care clinicians, senior leadership, Partners in Care (which employs VNSNY's home health aides) and the employees of VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans. In addition to teaching practical skills, the training has helped raise general awareness among the VNSNY staff of the needs and perspectives of their LGBTQ patients and clients and, in some cases, overturned existing prejudices.



All VNSNY employees continue to receive a refresher SAGECare course each year, and the LGBTQ training is also now included as part of each new employee's orientation program. To minimize any potential language barriers, VNSNY recently provided resources to translate SAGECare training into Cantonese, in addition to the existing English and Spanish versions. VNSNY also plans to use its SAGECare experience as a template for enhancing its cultural competency among other communities, including different religious and ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, the organization has taken a number of other important steps to enhance its connections with New York's LGBTQ population:

Guided by input from its LGBTQ Advocacy Group, VNSNY created a formal LGBTQ Outreach office (supported by funding from the New York Community Trust), which has been actively forging partnerships with community-based LGBTQ organizations across the New York City area. Through these partnerships, VNSNY is now better equipped than ever to connect its LGBTQ patients and plan members with ongoing resources in the community. In addition, the organization has developed a series of brochures for consumers and health care providers that highlight its LGBTQ-friendly products in multiple languages. VNSNY has also been an official participant in the NYC PRIDE March for the past two years, and has had a high-profile presence at regional Pride events in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Its post-surgical program for gender affirmation patients is thriving and expanding as well.

A few months ago, the last VNSNY cohort completed the SAGECare training. Every division of the organization now has official Platinum certification – indicating that 80 percent or more of its staff has completed the training. "Speaking as a 70-year-old gay man, I can't express how proud I am to be part of

an organization that has stepped up to the plate the way VNSNY has,” says Mr. Rothstein. “SAGE has been a joy to work with, and the fact that we’re now credentialed by them sends a huge signal both to LGBTQ individuals and to the community as a whole.

It tells all of the dozens of LGBTQ organizations throughout the five boroughs, as well as elected officials who represent LGBTQ communities, that they can be confident we will deliver the right care to their members. Our SAGE certification tells the world that we are truly committed to equitable health care, and that we offer a safe place for LGBTQ seniors to receive the high-quality care they need and deserve.”

*“My nurse was exceptional in her persona, professional expertise and total support, in addition to providing special care needed by transgender individuals.”*

— Patient, on VNSNY care following gender affirmation procedure

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word Queer and the acronym LGBTQ throughout this brief reflects Community Catalyst’s and the Center’s organizational usage standards. However, SAGE generally advises against using the word Queer in its work because it may have negative associations for older LGBT people.

<sup>2</sup> SAGE, *Out & Visible: The Experiences and Attitudes of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Older Adults, Ages 45-75*. 2014. Available at <https://www.sageusa.org/resource-posts/out-visible-the-experiences-and-attitudes-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-older-adults-ages-45-75-by-the-numbers-full-report/>.

<sup>3</sup> GLAAD, *Accelerating Acceptance 2018*. Available at <https://www.glaad.org/publications/accelerating-acceptance-2018>.

<sup>4</sup> AARP, *Maintaining Dignity: A Survey of LGBTQ Adults Age 45 and Older*, March 2018. Available at <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/maintaining-dignity-LGBTQ.html>.

<sup>5</sup> In 2012, the Administration on Aging joined with the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, and the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office on Disability to become the Administration for Community Living (ACL). ACL is now the federal agency responsible for increasing access to community supports, while focusing attention and resources on the unique needs of older Americans and people with disabilities across the lifespan.

<sup>6</sup> Meredith Doherty, Tim R. Johnston, Hilary Meyer, Sherrill Wayland & Nancy Giunta. *SAGE’s National Resource Center on LGBT Aging Is Training a Culturally Competent Aging Network*, *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 40.2 (2016). Available at <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/asag/gen/2016/00000040/00000002/art00016>; Hilary Meyer & Tim R. Johnston. *The National Resource Center on LGBTQ Aging Provides Critical Training to Aging Service Providers*, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 57:2-4, 407-412 (2014). Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01634372.2014.901997>.



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