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## New Resource Center's Director Aims to Keep Aging LGBT Elders Well-Served—and Out of the Closet

By **BETSY DORSETT**

*Established this year through an historic Department of Health and Human Services grant, the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging is America's first organization to provide technical assistance toward improving the quality of services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults. The center was created by Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) in partnership with 10 leading organizations from around the country. **Ageing Today** is pleased to offer the following profile of Hilary Meyer, the Center's new director.*

The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging is moving forward to ensure that services and supports continue to improve for LGBT older adults. They are training LGBT organizations about the basic needs of an aging LGBT population, providing information to the mainstream aging network on LGBT issues and empowering LGBT elders with knowledge and resources. Taking the helm of this new project is Center director Hilary Meyer.

Meyer was previously with New York-based Lambda Legal, where she monitored federal and state legislation and developed advocacy and education initiatives for the LGBT community. Prior to working in law, she had a background in patient advocacy and social work, providing direct social services to low-income, chronically mentally ill adults.

"We're facing right now an unprecedented growth in the number of adults who are getting older who have been living the majority of their lives out of the closet. And as that population ages, there are a number of special circumstances that they're going to be facing that the majority of the aging population doesn't have to face," says Meyer.

### DEMAND FOR LGBT SERVICES

This past October, the Resource Center launched its website, [www.lgbtagingcenter.org](http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org), and in that month received more than 350,000 hits from thousands of visitors—clearly demonstrating the need for, and interest in, its services. As the first of its kind, the Center has a unique opportunity to fill in gaps in information, resources and training, both in the LGBT community and the aging services network, in order to best meet the needs of LGBT older adults.

In their first year, the Center conducted listening sessions across the country in which they asked professionals what information was most needed. Based on this feedback, Meyer says the Center will be integrating already existing resources, as well as developing new ones.

“We want to make sure we’re not missing anything that’s out there and then take on the vital needs that are not being met because of a void of information,” says Meyer. Meyer’s goal is get more and more feedback about what’s working and what’s not and modify it as they go to keep the site relevant, informative and user-friendly.

Beyond the website, the Center is developing curriculum for both LGBT organizations and aging services providers, and will soon be training educators to use the curriculum nationwide. With the help of education and curriculum development experts, Meyer says they are developing the strongest possible best-practices curriculum. But the first step, she says, is starting the conversation. LGBT organizations must recognize that their constituents are aging and will be confronting a new set of issues. And mainstream aging services providers must be provided with the information and tools they need to best serve the LGBT elders already accessing their services and programs.

Meyer wants to provide information on the website, at professional conferences and soon in the best-practices training curriculum that will prepare the mainstream aging services network, LGBT organizations and even LGBT older adults to address their specific circumstances.

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#### **MANY CHALLENGES FACE LGBT ELDERS**

Core inequities and assumptions unique to the LGBT population manifest themselves in significant ways as people age. For instance, because the federal government does not yet recognize same-gender relationships, LGBT individuals can face tremendous problems accessing benefits upon which many older adults rely, such as Medicare and Social Security, when a partner becomes ill or passes away. Aging services providers and LGBT organizations need to be trained to work with older LGBT individuals to prepare documents that best protect their assets and access to benefits outside of the protections in place for heterosexual couples.

LGBT elders face the added challenge of finding a place where they can live or receive services in a safe and inclusive environment. Meyer points out that many people end up going back into the closet as they age, hiding their sexual or gender identity in order to meet their basic needs through social services.

She stresses that it is “important to recognize that it’s not necessarily ill-will,” but often, rather, a matter of a lack of training and information regarding LGBT issues that create situations in which LGBT individuals feel ostracized. She says that while many professionals indicate that they are dedicated to helping people no matter what, they lack the best information and training to do so.

“For the Resource Center, one of our biggest goals is to make this information available to people who want to be trained and who need the information,” says Meyer, who is ever mindful Center’s ultimate mission to provide LGBT elders with the services and resources they need to age successfully. ❖

*ASA staff member Betsy Dorsett is senior coordinator of the ASA website. She holds a Masters degree in sexuality studies from San Francisco State University, Calif.*