

## northwest

**Surveying Needs**

Sexual minority seniors polled on experiences

by Patricia L. MacAodha

**Y**ou've marched in many Pride parades. Perhaps you even remember Stonewall. You've fought for your civil rights, and if you're somewhere between 60 and 80, you feel you shouldn't have to fight for your dignity anymore—but now it all begins again. As a boomer, you're beginning to age, and some World War II babies are pushing 70. Some of you might be looking at assisted living or other special residential options as you age.

A cooperative effort involving Elder Resource Alliance (ERA), Senior Housing and Retirement Enterprises (SHARE) and a housing committee of gay and lesbian participants who have worked with both bodies has resulted in a survey geared toward determining how queer elders are treated in assisted living centers and independent living settings. The committee wanted to know what would constitute an atmosphere that is welcoming, affirming and nurturing to queer seniors. A preliminary application surveyed 12 such residents.

The need for the survey stemmed from, among other factors, a report released in April 2003 by the Gerontological Society of America. According to that report, "Older gay men and lesbians often mistrust the health and social service networks as a result of lifelong experiences of marginalization and oppression...discrimination that continues in many social and institutional environments."

The stories come from seniors and their families—sometimes simply sad, while others border on horror—about queer brothers and sisters who have been thrown, unprepared, into the world of senior services. It's not an atmosphere known to be friendly to our kind.

Happily, some local members of the sexual minorities community are doing their best to assure queer-friendly resources will be available and to push for zero tolerance of homophobic treatment of sexual minority elders through a combination of effective policies and diversity training for management and staff involved in elder care and programming.

The collaborative survey interviews discovered concerns about "conditions; acceptance; access to bulletin boards; a wider variety of activities; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender staff members; and access to transportation," said committee member Diane Tourigny. Also noted were high staff turnover and the predominance on staffs of recent immigrants who "evangelized to hate queers" and have engaged in behaviors that have resulted in unacceptable neglect and abuse of sexual minority elders.

The results of the preliminary survey will be incorporated into the next phase of the committee's research, which will be to approach senior program administrators and staff members willing to answer the questions. An anticipated follow-up would include agreeing to schedule diversity

trainings for their staffs. Another result will be to create a database to provide information for seniors on which residences and programs are gay-friendly and who will provide services equal to what's available to heterosexual elders.

ERA program coordinator Rachel Indigo Cerise Baum says queer seniors are "five times less likely than heterosexual seniors" to pursue services to elders "because of real or perceived experiences of rejection and ridicule." She has collected incidents experienced by queer seniors that point out how vital the database and diversity training can be.

An elderly woman with Alzheimer's, attending a dance, had danced with several men. When she began dancing with another woman, staff members immediately intervened and pulled her away. In another incident, a group of residents walked by a queer senior, and one remarked, "Oh, there's one of them." Attempting to explain the situation, a woman later came to the senior's door and said, "They said that because they think you're gay." The person "meant to be helpful," Baum says, but the result for the individual was fear, uncertainty and further isolation in the living environment. This person is so fearful that Baum asked that gender be excluded from this report.

Both Baum and Tourigny mentioned the



ERA program coordinator Rachel Indigo Cerise Baum believes diversity training is vital to senior centers.

MARTY DAVIS

bulletin board problem, citing the importance for queer seniors to have access to information about community events. (Homophobic hands remove queer event fliers posted at senior-serving assisted living centers). Loss of such information can result in deepening isolation for sexual minority elders. The survey discovered that few senior facilities offer options for marginalized queer seniors to protest homophobic treatment. While government oversight includes nondiscrimination regulations, they don't apply to other residents.

The housing committee is seeking more interviewees, according to Tourigny. She believes safety and inclusion in senior facilities affects everyone. No matter what your age, this is about your future. **jo**

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