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Active Elders Advise Others on How to Take a Seat at the Table

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by Karen Taylor

The mandate that created Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) includes a requirement for constituent engagement. In most communities, this engagement occurs through advisory boards and councils. Elders who step forward to represent LGBT issues on these councils are growing, and have words of advice to offer to others interested in doing so.

Eldon Murray and Bill Serpe Shape Policy in Milwaukee

Eldon Murray was one of the great leaders of the Milwaukee gay community, according to SAGE Milwaukee Executive Director Bill Serpe. He recalled that when Murray founded SAGE Milwaukee, he reached out to the County of Milwaukee AAA to provide information on LGBT aging issues. The AAA director invited Murray to join the Advisory Council board. Serpe later took Murray's position on the AAA Council—and more.

"I became chair of the underserved populations work group and a member of the board of directors in the family care program, which is now a separate division in the AAA," said Serpe.

The inclusion of LGBT elders has permeated policy and planning work in other departments. A recent needs assessment survey distributed by the AAA included an opportunity for respondents to self-identify as LGBT. Forms and surveys distributed by other county and city agencies now contain that inclusive language. Because of the groundwork Murray provided, Serpe confirmed that elder LGBT people are always included in policy planning, and that SAGE Milwaukee is receiving a grant from the AAA.

Edith Lederberg Builds Support in Broward County, Fla.

AAA Director Edith Lederberg found support for LGBT elders through her personal relationships with LGBT people, which include former staff member, Noble McArtor.

"He really educated me about the gay population," Lederberg said. "I became very sympathetic, especially for those who were getting to the age where they needed some services, but did not feel they could go to the centers because they didn't feel comfortable."

Lederberg believes "The community needed someone who was an ally, and wasn't afraid of repercussions. I did it because it was the right thing to do."

Lederberg ensures that the Advisory Council continues to have LGBT representation.

"I don't put people on the commission just because they're gay," she said. "But I want gay representation along with skills and experience."

Bob Tomasulo's South Florida Experiences Benefit Elders in North Carolina

LAIN member and Broward County AAA Advisory board member Bob Tomasulo helped found SAGE-South Florida. When he and his partner retired to North Carolina, Tomasulo contacted his new county AAA and offered his services as a volunteer.

"When they saw my resume, they were delighted," he smiled. "And when an opening occurred on the board, they asked me to join."

Tomasulo's experience with the AAA in North Carolina differs from the one in South Florida.

"Ft. Lauderdale is pretty acknowledged as a gay retirement community," Tomasulo said. "Asheville is a bit more quiet. There's a tradition of 'live and let live' here."

This does not mean that Tomasulo is closeted about himself or his relationships. The

AAA advisory board knows that he is gay and that his life brings another dimension of his expertise to the board.

"I'm meeting next week with a minister and psychologist who are looking to open an assisted living facility in Ashville," he said. "They want to make sure it will be appropriately welcoming to LGBT older adults."

Missouri Silver Legislature Provides Input Regarding State's Planning Process on Aging Issues

Because all AAAs must have constituent representation, most of them have advisory boards. Others have different models. SAGE Metro St. Louis Director Sherrill Wayland reports that Missouri's "Silver Legislature" serves as the primary method of input on the state's planning process regarding aging issues.

Comprised of Missourians age 60 and over who are elected by their peers, this body meets annually to create a platform of recommendations that are presented to the Missouri legislature and department for the aging. SAGE of Metro St. Louis has constituents who serve in the Silver Legislature.

"They make sure that LGBT issues are part of the platform," Wayland said.

LGBT Elders Make the Best Messengers About the Importance of LGBT Aging Issues

Through a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, SAGE is working with five of its affiliates to create civic engagement opportunities in their communities. SAGE affiliates in Denver, Milwaukee, St. Louis and two New York locations (Hudson Valley and Long Island) will be building constituent advocacy programs to engage LGBT elders in aging advisory councils and other settings.

"There are no better messengers on the importance of LGBT aging issues than LGBT elders themselves, and no more important avenue for change than our AAA's," said SAGE Executive Director Michael Adams. "That's why the work that has pioneered in Milwaukee, Ft. Lauderdale and other communities is so important."

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