

Understanding Caregiving from Different Angles

Over the past years our communities have had an increase in calls from individuals who are caring for loved ones with special circumstances. They themselves are, or they are caring for, someone who has a different gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexual preference. They are looking for information, resources, and caregiver support to assist with keeping themselves, a friend, neighbor or loved one living as independently as possible in their home while not feeling isolated and or feeling uncomfortable with the supports that are given. As a community we must enhance our personal and professional capacity to work with older adults and caregivers by learning about the unique life experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender (LGBT) older adults and to help reduce their fear and isolation so they are more comfortable asking for support.

For a glimpse into the challenges facing this population take an opportunity to view the critically acclaimed documentary *Gen Silent* by Stu Maddox. This documentary asks six LGBT seniors if they hide their friends, their spouses- their entire lives in order to survive in the care system. Their surprising decisions are captured through intimate access to their day-to-day lives over the course of a year. The documentary is very inspiring and insightful into the lives of individuals who are LGBT and the caregivers that care for them.

As we all know, caregiving takes many forms. While we might think of caregivers as paid aides, in reality, the majority of caregiving in the U.S. is provided by informal caregivers, usually a spouse or adult child. In the LGBT community, it is important to realize that many LGBT older adults do not have the same familial supports.

For example, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBT older adults are:

- Twice as likely to age as a single person
- Twice as likely to live alone
- Three to four times less likely to have children to support them

While LGBT older adults may not have the same biological family supports as their heterosexual counterparts, many have developed important social networks of partners, friends, ex-partners, neighbors and others. These networks are often referred to as "families of choice."

What's Different about LGBT Caregiving?

There are more similarities between LGBT and non-LGBT caregivers than differences—all caregivers provide critically needed support and assistance to older adults to help them age in their communities. However, LGBT caregivers' families of choice may not always be recognized under the law. It is important for LGBT caregivers to be aware of the local services in their areas, as well as the laws and regulations in their cities and/or states to ensure they and their loved ones are protected. Here are some issues for LGBT caregivers to consider:

Health and end-of-life care: Due to federal and some state laws, same-sex spouses and loved ones are not granted the right to oversee healthcare and end-of-life decisions. Fortunately, there are simple legal documents (e.g. Advance Directives) that can protect your choices.

Finances: Whether you are caregiving for a partner or a friend, it is important to have certain legal documents (e.g. Financial Power of Attorney) in place to ensure that you can manage your loved one's finances in the event he/she cannot oversee them.

Family and Medical Leave: Unfortunately, LGBT partners and family are not currently covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA provides unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave. Fortunately, many employers do extend these benefits to LGBT individuals, so be sure to check your employer's policies.

LGBT affirmative care: Many LGBT older adults and their caregivers can be reluctant to reach out for services for fear of discrimination. It is important to research service providers regarding their policies on non-discrimination or directly ask if they serve LGBT individuals. Not accessing essential services can lead to increased physical and mental health issues.

The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging offers valuable information and can be found online at www.lgbtagingcenter.org or by phone at 212-741-2247. There are also many local organizations around the state that offer support to caregivers and are a wonderful local resources for individuals. *Information from: National Resource Center on LGBT Aging ©*

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