

# Activity 5

## Housing



“Until I feel safe walking down the street holding a woman’s hand...and not feel like I’m going to offend even one person, there is a need for a retirement community of like-minded people.”

*Bonnie McGowan of Birds of a Feather Senior Home*

## Part I

### Need For Affirmative Housing Options

Watch "Harry's Concerns" under "Housing"  
play for approximately 2 minutes

Watch "Harry Makes a Decision" under "Housing"  
play for approximately 2 minutes

Harry Bartron hoped to move into the nation's first low income assisted living facility in America, Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing (GLEH). He admitted that the idea of moving into a traditional elder home did not appeal to him because he felt he would not be comfortable there. Before GLEH opened in 2007, he was offered a space at Kingsley Manor. He took the room in order to get out of the SRO (Single Room Occupancy) housing he had been in for years. Once Harry arrived, he found himself surrounded by elders who let him know that he made them uncomfortable. In order to deal with this, he left Kingsley Manor every morning. Mercedes Marquez, General Manager of the City of Los Angeles Housing Department, states that returning to the closet is a common occurrence for many LGBT seniors, as those seniors now find themselves living in a housing facility with some of the same people who discriminated against them so many years ago.

Watch "Miss Major's Concerns" under "Housing"  
play for approximately 2 minutes

Watch "The Realities for Miss Major" under "Housing"  
play for approximately :30 seconds

Miss Major worried that as she gets older she won't know where to go. She never really worked in a legitimate paying field until later in life, so she imagines herself living in SRO housing in a major city with all of her belongings thrown into a cart. As mentioned before by Laguna Honda, state licensing boards will keep her from living in female wards should she find herself living in a state run institution.

## Options Now Available

Watch "Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing" under "Housing"  
play for approximately 2:30 minutes

In the film, Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing (GLEH) is seen as one of the first housing options built with the LGBT elder population in mind. The facility is now complete and is located in Hollywood, California. Facilities such as this one are springing up sporadically, but the problem reaches far beyond the rooms available. Additionally, it is difficult to get funding for such projects and as is often the case, when government agencies refuse to recognize the specific needs of the LGBT community, creative ways to advocate for their own needs must arise. GLEH is a perfect example of this creativity. However, finding property to build on is one challenge, as well as trying to locate subsidies other than a personal donation is also an issue.

## Part II

### HOUSING

- ElderCare estimates that "by 2030, when the baby boomers reach age 65, one in five Americans will be at least 65, for a total of about 70 million older people." Within this growing population, the voice of the LGBT community will have to be heard. According to the Gay and Lesbian Task force, there are "currently an estimated 3 million LGBT elders in the United States. By 2030, that number will nearly double."
- When people are considering the idea of moving to a retirement home, the most important aspect is the feeling of being safe, secure and protected. One step in the process of aging successfully is to create a living facility that is a community of like-minded individuals. Since there is a lack of safe zone environments in nursing homes and retirement communities, many gay elders enter a senior home under the pretense of being someone they are not.
- "Gay elders entering assisted living facilities and other institutions are often presumed to be heterosexual and may feel compelled to hide their sexual identity" (Cahill & South, 2002). Thus, the individual hides under the guise of a heterosexual being, denying their true identity. This enables the harboring of a non-true self that ultimately contributes to unsuccessful ageing. "The fear of experiencing discrimination can reinforce social isolation and keep gay elders from making use of healthcare and other services" (Cahill & South, 2002). This isolation prohibits the full use of accessing the facilities in a senior community.

- The LGBT population has spoken out with stories of having to keep their sexual orientation a secret, of a roommate asking to be transferred, or of having a partner on a separate floor of a senior center. Bonnie McGowan of Birds of a Feather senior home in New Mexico says, “Until I feel safe walking down the street holding a woman’s hand...and not feel like I’m going to offend even one person, there is a need for a retirement community of like-minded people.”
- According to Kaiser Family foundation from a 2001 nationwide survey, 34% of gay individuals have been turned away from renting or buying a home because of their sexual orientation, or have known someone who has. A realty agent told another prospective tenant that they didn’t want “two guys in one bedroom, if you know what I mean.” This mentality leads to the idea that the older LGBT person is someone who is lonely, isolated and depressed which is a myth. The difficulties that are uniquely experienced by the LGBT community are a result of living with and facing discrimination.
- As the LGBT community grows older, they enter a world of services that may not be familiar with its population. One major issue is that conventional elderly providers have limited information and/or training on how to appropriately work with and serve a diverse community, thus enabling the need for there to be LGBT friendly site specific senior centers that can cater to this population.
- An issue that surfaces for caregivers in a senior center setting is whether to disclose their relationship with the partner because of how society may or may not view their place or role. One woman described her need to pass as her partner’s blood relative to “normalize” her behavior for the health care providers. This demonstrates how dominant the idea of what family and marriage is and how hetero-centric our culture is when it enables the suppression of relationships between anyone and their partners.
- Some individuals have had success stories while dealing with staff, but as one woman put it, “Luck really isn’t good enough though is it? I ought to just deserve decent treatment.”
- Discrimination is damaging as individuals have been penalized because of their sexuality. Individuals are not seen as the legitimate caregiver by the staff and this is damaging to the relationship itself as same sex partners have to in essence denounce their relationship and declare themselves as “just friends.”
- “Many gay people may enter retirement without having had regular access to healthcare during their lives” (Cahill & South, 2002).
- In dealing with the day to day life of a transgendered person, the community from which to pull resources is quite limited, both with the lack of understanding by the population as a whole, as well as the support that individuals need. “People also experience gender-related bias because they do not fit into expected male-female gender roles” (Cahill & South, 2002).
- Transgenders have for their whole life not fit into other’s expectations. They have often suppressed who they are, and this contributes to slow disintegration of quality of life as they begin to age.

- One issue that arises for the transgender community in a senior center is that of everyday choices. An example is the use of the restroom. People who are living and seeing themselves as different sex have trouble identifying the proper male/female restroom to occupy. Do I use the restroom to which I identify or do I use the restroom to which I was born? However, coupled with this dilemma is the notion that there is also the cohort that doesn't identify as either male or female, thus contributing once again to trying to transition one's identity to a hetero-conscious society. One way to eliminate this everyday issue is to create single occupancy restrooms which will ensure safety and comfort for a transgender community.
- “Most transsexuals experience a positive development of personal sensuality when they finally are able to live in congruence with their deepest perceptions of their own gender. Professionals can assist in this regard by validating the sexual potential of their older clients, offering counseling and education when needed, and assisting family members to accept their older relative's gender presentation and sexuality” (Outword, 2000).
- According to Joy Silver, President and CEO of RainbowVision Properties, “When I lived in NYC, I passed a residence for the extremely frail in the Village. One night I looked up at the window and saw lights flashing, a mirrored disco ball spinning, heard music blaring, and saw go-go boys dancing. Smiling to myself, I said ‘yeah – that's what I want. I want that party when I get to be that age. Cause if there's no dancing, I'm not going!’”

### For Discussion or Questioning

- What kind of homophobia and discrimination might Miss Major be up against should she need to move into an assisted living facility?
- What were some obstacles that Harry faced at Kingsley Manor?
- Why is there a need for LGBT sensitive housing?
- How many LGBT specific housing options are there in America for seniors?
- What types of measures does a LGBT senior have to prepare for when they enter a facility that is hetero-normative? Why is that? What can the housing facility do to be better prepared?
- What can be done within your local community to help prepare for the growing need for LGBT senior housing?
- Why is a home is much more than a roof over our heads?

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