



TESTIMONY

New York State Senate and New York State Assembly
SFY25 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Human Services
Wednesday, January 31, 2024

Submitted by:

MJ Okma

Senior Manager of Advocacy and Government Relations at SAGE

On behalf of SAGE and the LGBTQ+ elders and older New Yorkers living with HIV that we serve, thank you to the members of the Senate and Assembly for holding this hearing today and providing a platform to present on SAGE's FY25 State Budget priorities.

Founded in New York in 1978, SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ older people and has been serving LGBTQ+ elders and older New Yorkers living with HIV for over four decades. We provide comprehensive social services and community-building programs through our network of LGBTQ+ welcoming older adult centers across New York City – called "SAGE Centers" – and through our partners across the state, including in the Hudson Valley, Syracuse, and Rochester. SAGE has also worked with leading developers to open New York's first two LGBTQ+-welcoming affordable elder housing developments located in Brooklyn and The Bronx, each of which house a state-of-the-art, ground-floor SAGE Center that provides comprehensive LGBTQ+-centered aging services.

Services for older New Yorkers are crucial as the population of New Yorkers aged 60 and older is growing five times faster than those under 18, with LGBTQ+ elders making up a significant part of this rapidly growing older population.ⁱ The number of New Yorkers aging with HIV is also growing because powerful HIV drugs are allowing many people to lead longer lives with HIV. In 2020, 60% of New Yorkers living with HIV were over the age of 50, estimated to be up to 73% by 2030.ⁱⁱ Additionally, while most new HIV cases occur in young New Yorkers, people over 50 are acquiring HIV at increasing rates and comprised 17% of new diagnoses in 2022.

Despite the size of these populations, LGBTQ+ elders and older New Yorkers living with HIV are often invisible, disconnected from services, and severely isolated. As they age and need more assistance and care, LGBTQ+ elders and people aging with HIV have fewer familial options than older people in general. They often cannot rely on children, spouses, or relatives for care and rarely have the financial resources to pay for private in-home care.ⁱⁱⁱ Because of their thin support networks, LGBTQ+ older people need to rely more heavily on community service providers for

care as they age. Yet, they're often distrustful of mainstream providers, as LGBTQ+ elders have faced a long history of compounding discrimination.^{iv}

Older New Yorkers living with HIV are similarly more likely to rely on government and community-based services due to high rates of multimorbidity and behavioral health issues and poverty.^v Many long-term-survivors never expected to live into their later years and cashed in their savings, retirement, and life insurance plans to pay for their immediate needs and support their community during the height of the epidemic.^{vi} Additionally, living in poverty—in and of itself—also facilitates HIV transmission among all age groups.^{vii}

The cumulative effect of stigma and living with discriminatory laws and policies for much of their lives has also resulted in major health disparities including increased rates of disability, poor physical and mental health, alcohol and tobacco use.^{viii} About 14% of LGBTQ+ New Yorkers over age 50 report frequent poor physical health and transgender New Yorkers of all ages were nearly 50% more likely to report being in fair or poor health when compared to non-transgender respondents, even when controlling for age and education.^{ix} These health disparities are also rooted in the lack of access to competent, inclusive, and affordable health care systems and social isolation. The programs and services offered at SAGE directly help address these challenges and connect LGBTQ+ elders and older people living with HIV to the support they need.

SAGE continues to evolve and expand to address the widespread disparities facing LGBTQ+ elders and older New Yorkers living with HIV with comprehensive services through our state's first LGBTQ+ friendly affordable elder housing developments, a network of SAGE Centers throughout New York City, partners across New York State, care management, our statewide SAGEVets program, and other related programming and services.

LGBTQ+ elders and older people living with HIV continue to be impacted by the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly expanding cost of living. This is not only because of their age, but also high levels of underlying health conditions, higher levels of poverty, food and housing insecurity, lower access to health care and supportive services, and mistrust of government and other institutions based on discrimination and mistreatment.^x All of these challenges are even further exacerbated for transgender elders and LGBTQ+ older people of color. To support more LGBTQ+ elders in and around New York City, SAGE has redesigned our program and service delivery models to provide a variety of in-person, virtual, and hybrid options. This helps to draw elders in for in-person services while addressing the direct needs of homebound elders, those with mobility challenges or with caregiving or work responsibilities and elders who have health concerns about returning to in-person programs and services. SAGE has also launched food pantry initiatives at SAGE Centers in Midtown Manhattan, Harlem, Bronx, and Brooklyn to support participants and address food security while integrating the Centers deeper into the neighborhoods they are located.

As noted, SAGE worked with prominent developers to directly address the housing insecurity experienced by so many LGBTQ+ elders by building LGBTQ+-welcoming affordable elder housing: Stonewall House in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Crotona Pride House in the Tremont neighborhood of the Bronx. The services and programs provided by SAGE at these buildings are crucial to stabilizing low-income and formerly homeless elders who moved into these buildings. Among the

services SAGE provides to tenants are Center programming, wellness checks, groceries delivery, and coordinating care with other providers and caregivers. Both developments are in neighborhoods with few services for the LGBTQ+ community resulting in significant demand in services, especially among the low-income and formerly homeless elders living in and around these developments. SAGE is further responding to the needs of community members by expanding multi-lingual programming in Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

The SAGEVets program, is a statewide initiative, that was created with support from the New York State Legislature to address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ older veterans, who are twice as likely to face housing insecurity compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers.^{xi} SAGEVets supports LGBTQ+ older veterans by helping them navigate the VA to get the benefits they deserve; aiding their overall health and wellness; and, providing referrals to counsel regarding discharge status upgrades – all while improving veterans-serving organizations’ LGBTQ+ competency. Additionally, thanks to the recent enactment of the New York Restoration of Honor Act, SAGEVets now provides support with discharge upgrades for older veterans who were discharged due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The military’s long history of enforced anti-LGBTQ+ policies followed by the discriminating Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) policy created many barriers between older LGBTQ+ veterans and their Federal VA benefits. Helping ensure these LGBTQ+ older veterans gain access to all the Federal VA benefits they are entitled to can provide life-changing support while also saving New York State significant amounts of funding by ensuring veterans access all their federal benefits instead of relying solely on State programs to address their housing and healthcare needs.

There is also a pressing need to increase services and support for the growing population of New Yorkers aging with HIV—a rapidly expanding cohort of people living with HIV. In fact, 73% of New Yorkers living with HIV are projected to be over the age of 50 by 2030.^{xii} New York must start making meaningful investments to ensure this growing population has the support they need to age in place in their communities. SAGEPositive is our program to support this population. SAGEPositive connects HIV-affected elders and those at risk for HIV to a wide range of services including sexual wellness workshops, social events, HIV and STI testing, case management, caregiver support, educational forums, and more. Expanding the successful SAGEPositive program across the state with a new funding designation—following the proven model of the statewide SAGEVets program—will help meet the needs of older people living with HIV and long-term survivors.

To support the vital programming and services for LGBTQ+ older New Yorkers outlined above, SAGE respectfully requests the following designation in the SFY25 Budget, totaling \$800,000—including \$650,000 of continued funding and \$150,000 to expand programing for the growing population of older New Yorkers living with HIV—in funding from the New York State Legislature:

- **\$300,000** renewal to support LGBTQ+ and allied residents in New York State’s first two LGBTQ+ affordable elder housing developments. This restoration includes \$100,000 to provide comprehensive care management and support services to low-income, predominately LGBTQ+ elder residents in and around these developments and \$200,000 in support of virtual, hybrid and in-person SAGE Center programming, general services, and expenses in operating the ground-floor SAGE Centers located in these buildings.

- **\$150,000** renewal to maintain and increase multi-lingual programming and service offerings. This will allow SAGE to continue to support monolingual Spanish elders who attend the SAGE Center Bronx and those who live in Crotona Pride House as well as monolingual Mandarin and Cantonese speaking residents living in Stonewall House and accessing programming and services at the SAGE Center Brooklyn.
- **\$200,000** renewal for SAGEVets to expand outreach and benefits connection for LGBTQ+ older veterans across the state. This funding will sustain the SAGEVets program and continue the program's expansion in Long Island, Rochester, and Syracuse.
- A new funding designation of **\$150,000** to help meet the growing demand for services among HIV-affected older adults across the state through the expansion of the SAGEPositive program outside of New York City.

Thank you so much to the New York State Legislature for its past and enduring support of SAGE's work and for providing me with this opportunity to testify. I look forward to working with you to address the needs of LGBTQ+ and HIV-affected elders in New York and answering any of your questions.

MJ Okma

Senior Manager for Advocacy and Government Relations, SAGE

mokma@sageusa.org

ⁱ LiveOn NY, "[Aging is Everyone's Business: Policies for Building a New York for All Ages](#)," August 2021

ⁱⁱ GILEAD, "[HIV Age Positively: 2021 Progress Report](#)", 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ AARP NY, "[Disrupting Disparities: Solutions for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers 50+](#)," January 2021.

^{iv} Movement Advancement Project, "[LGBT Older People & COVID-19](#)," May 2020.

^v Mark Brennan-Ing, PhD, "[Emerging Issues in HIV and Aging](#)," Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging at Hunter College, May 2020.

^{vi} Aaron Tax, "[Issue Memo: Older People Living with HIV](#)," SAGE, 2019.

^{vii} Pellowski JA, Kalichman SC, Matthews KA, Adler N., "[A pandemic of the poor: social disadvantage and the U.S. HIV epidemic](#)" Am Psychol, May 2013.

^{viii} Charles A Emler, "Social Economic, and Health Disparities Among LGBTQ Older Adults," Generations (2016 Summer) 40(2): 16-22.

^{ix} Frazer., M. S & Howe, E.E., "[Transgender health and economic insecurity: A report from the 2015 LGBT Health and Human Services Needs Assessment Survey](#)," 2015.

^x AARP NY, "[Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans](#)," March, 2018.

^{xi} VA Homeless Programs, "[Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and all sexual and gender minority \(LGBTQ+\) people](#)" January 2022.

^{xii} GILEAD, "[HIV Age Positively: 2021 Progress Report](#)" (2021).