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Testimony to the NYS Legislature's Joint Budget Hearing on Housing

Delivered in person on February 5, 2020

by Melissa Sklarz, Senior Government Relations Strategist

On behalf of SAGE and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) elders we serve, thank you to members of the Senate and Assembly for holding this hearing today and allowing me the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of SAGE with respect to the FY21 New York State Budget. My name is Melissa Sklarz and I am SAGE's Senior Government Relations Strategist. Founded in 1978 in New York City, SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older people.

Service-enriched LGBT-friendly housing is crucial for our state's LGBT elders. Aging alone can be wrought with challenges, including social isolation and diminished income. For LGBT older people, however – many of whom have experienced stigma and discrimination throughout their lives as a direct result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity – the deck is stacked against them.

LGBT older people are facing profound challenges in accessing welcoming housing. A 2014 ten-state investigation conducted by the Equal Rights Center and SAGE found that 48% of same-sex older couple testers seeking housing in senior independent living facilities across the country experienced discrimination.¹

The data from these studies shows the pervasive challenges that LGBT elders face when seeking housing. In New York City, housing challenges are particularly acute. Countless LGBT older people find themselves priced out of the neighborhoods in which they have lived for years due to rising rents and financial insecurity as they age. Unless effectively addressed, this housing crisis among LGBT older people will only worsen as the LGBT elder population doubles and more "out" LGBT people age into their retirement years. In fact, research estimates there are between 2.5 and 4 million LGBT older adults in the United States – and this population will double by 2030.² Yet today, there are less than 500 units of affordable housing in existing LGBT-welcoming complexes nationwide.

LGBT older New Yorkers need and deserve affordable, welcoming housing. This is why, 42 years after our founding, SAGE is realizing a dream that's been years in the making. With support from New York City and State, and with our developer partners, SAGE is opening our state's first LGBT-welcoming affordable elder housing: Stonewall House in Fort Greene, Brooklyn and Crotona Senior Residences in the Bronx, NY.

¹ SAGE & Equal Rights Center (2014). *Opening Doors: An Investigation of Barriers to Senior Housing for Same Sex Couples*.

² Choi, S. and Meyer, I. (2016). *LGBT Aging: A Review of Research Findings, Needs, and Policy Implications*. The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

On December 17, 2019, SAGE and BFC Partners cut the ribbon on Stonewall House in Brooklyn, marking the opening of New York State's very first – and the country's largest – LGBT-welcoming elder housing. Later this year, in spring of 2020, SAGE and HELP USA will open Crotona Senior Residences in the Bronx, the second LGBT-friendly elder housing development in the State.

Stonewall House is located on the New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) Ingersoll Houses campus. Stonewall House offers 145 100% affordable apartments for low income elders and 25% of the units will house formerly homeless elders. This development, like its companion project, Crotona Senior Residences in the Bronx, will feature a ground-floor state-of-the-art SAGE Center, open to residents and members of the surrounding community.

Crotona Senior Residences will offer 83 LGBT-welcoming affordable apartments. Like Stonewall House, the marquee of Crotona Senior Residences will be its ground-floor 10,000 square foot SAGE Center, making it the largest SAGE Center in the City. This development will also house a diverse elder population and 30% of the units will house chronically homeless elders.

Each of these buildings' SAGE Centers will be open to building residents, SAGE Center constituents from our existing centers in each of these boroughs, and older people from the local community. Through the SAGE Centers, SAGE will offer care management and support services. The SAGE Centers will follow SAGE's highly successful model, offering residents and local community members daily congregate meals, social services, educational workshops, counseling, health, wellness and nutrition classes, and peer support – complimented by on-site care management. These SAGE Centers will also bring much needed services to neighborhoods lacking in LGBT supports.

As noted, Stonewall House is located on the Ingersoll Houses campus of NYCHA public housing. NYCHA reports that the average income level of households living in the Ingersoll Houses is \$23,889. SAGE anticipates that the Stonewall House SAGE Center will serve a demographic of low-income LGBT elders that mirrors this income level. In addition, there is an overall dearth of resources for older people in the adjacent housing developments. As such, SAGE expects serving an influx of elders from the surrounding Fort Greene community, including older public housing residents in Ingersoll, Walt Whitman and Farragut Houses, which surround the site of Ingersoll Senior Residences.

SAGE is grateful for the generous support from New York State in FY20 to provide the care management and support services that LGBT and ally elders in these neighborhoods need and deserve. In FY21, SAGE respectfully requests a restoration of the \$100,000 in support from New York State to provide comprehensive care management, SAGE Center programming, and support services to low income, predominantly LGBT elder residents in and around our State's first LGBT welcoming elder housing developments. SAGE also requests a restoration of \$200,000 in support of our general services and expenses in support of our state's LGBT elders. In total, SAGE requests a restoration of \$300,000 in SY21.

