



Testimony to the New York State Assembly Budget Committee on Human Services

**Delivered in person on February 9, 2021
by Melissa Sklarz, Senior Government Relations Strategist**

My name is Melissa Sklarz and I am SAGE's Senior Government Relations Strategist. Thank you to members of the Assembly for holding this hearing on human services and allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of SAGE.

SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT elders. Founded in 1978, SAGE provides services and programs to LGBT older people in New York City and through our four SAGE affiliates across New York State, including on Long Island, in the Hudson Valley and in Syracuse and Rochester, other affiliates across the U.S.

Services for older New Yorkers are crucial – and will become even more important. According to LiveOn New York, by 2030, 20% of New Yorkers will be over the age of 60. LGBT elders are a significant part of this rapidly growing older population. However, they are often invisible, disconnected from services and severely isolated. LGBT elders are twice as likely to live alone; half as likely to be partnered; and more than four times less likely to have kids. Many LGBT elders are half as likely to have close relatives to call for help.

Because of their thin support networks, LGBT older people need to rely more heavily on community service providers for care as they age. Yet, they're often distrustful of mainstream providers – and for good reason. LGBT older people are more likely to face discrimination around their sexual orientation and gender identity when accessing health care, social services or other programs. For so many LGBT elders, SAGE is their safety net.

The need for services and supports among LGBT elders is dramatically exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. LGBT elders are living at the epicenter of this public health crisis. This is not only because of their age, but also because of high levels of underlying health conditions like HIV and diabetes, higher levels of poverty and food and housing insecurity, lower access to health care and supportive services, social isolation and thin support networks and mistrust of government and other institutions based on historical and current discrimination and mistreatment. This is backed up by data: AARP's 2018 report *Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans* revealed that 76% of older LGBT people are concerned about having adequate family and/or social supports

to rely on as they age. All of these challenges are even further exacerbated for transgender elders and LGBT older people of color.

SAGE exists to provide LGBT elders with comprehensive services through our state's first LGBT-friendly elder housing developments, our SAGE Centers, care management, SAGEVets and related programs and services.

To address the housing insecurity among LGBT older people, SAGE and our developer partners built our state's first LGBT-welcoming affordable elder housing: Stonewall House in Fort Greene, Brooklyn and Crotona Pride House in the Bronx. Both buildings have a set aside for formerly homeless elders. Both buildings and their on-site services are serving predominantly low-income elders. Both developments are located in neighborhoods with few services for the LGBT community. What this means is a significant demand in services, especially among the low income and formerly homeless elders living in and around these developments.

Further, like all older adult centers in New York, SAGE has not offered in person congregate programming at our SAGE Centers, nor have our affiliates offered programs since mid-March. To ensure that the LGBT elders who we serve have access to community and connection, we have reinvented and reimagined our programming to meet the demand among LGBT elders. We have pivoted our programs and services to telephonic and virtual formats to ensure that the thousands of LGBT elders who rely on SAGE continue to be engaged and stay connected. From yoga and Spanish classes to discussion groups, SAGE is offering more than 100 virtual SAGE Center programs a week, attracting hundreds of LGBT elders and allies.

In addition to our SAGE Centers' virtual programming, SAGE is offering ongoing virtual and telephonic meetings, support groups, financial support services, and programs through our SAGEVet initiative.

For older LGBT older vets, the barriers mount. Many left the military with discharge paperwork that noted that they were "homosexual." As a result of fears of discrimination and discharge issues, many LGBT elder veterans are not receiving Federal VA benefits and instead rely on State public assistance programs, shifting what should be a federal expense to New York State and leads to impoverishment, over-reliance on emergency room visits and hospitalization for medical care, and homelessness. Not only does SAGEVets provide crucial supports but SAGEVets saves New York State significant amounts of funding by ensuring veterans access the federal benefits entitled to them.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBT elders and older LGBT veterans, many of whom were already struggling with financial insecurity, food insecurity, acute social isolation, and exacerbating health disparities, are dealing with mounting challenges. Throughout the pandemic, SAGEVets has continued to provide support, information, and referral to elder LGBT veterans; conducted wellness checks among participants; offered telephonic one-on-one and group support; and, launched virtual programming to continue to connect older LGBT veterans to the community.

SAGE also has launched several new initiatives to respond to the emerging and mounting needs of older LGBT New Yorkers. Financial insecurity among LGBT elders has been exacerbated by the economic devastation from COVID-19. All of this makes SAGECents – our new online program developed specifically to improve LGBT elders’ financial stability and reduce economic stress in these uncertain times – so important. Further, within weeks of the initial shelter-in-place directive, SAGE launched SAGEConnect, a national program that matches volunteers with LGBT elders to combat social isolation. To date, we’ve connected nearly 600 LGBT older people from across the country– including hundreds from across New York State—with volunteers.

These programs, services and housing could not come at a more crucial time for our state’s LGBT elders. New York’s LGBT elders rely on SAGE for support, community and connection. SAGE is a cornerstone of the state’s LGBT community, providing vital services to LGBT elders and older people living with HIV for 43 years. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, SAGE has shifted considerable capacity, energy and resources to adapt to the new reality and reimagine our programs and services for virtual and telephonic delivery.

To that end, SAGE requests a restoration of \$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 very 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 SF22.

SAGE also respectfully requests a restoration of \$150,000 in funding to continue the crucial outreach to and benefits connection for LGBT older veterans. This support will sustain SAGEVets program and access for LGBT elder veterans throughout the state including in Rochester and Syracuse

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering any questions.