



TESTIMONY

New York State Senate and New York State Assembly
SFY23 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Human Services
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Delivered by:

MJ Okma

Senior Manager of Advocacy and Government Relations at SAGE

On behalf of SAGE and the LGBTQ+ elders 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 FY23 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 HIV-affected older New Yorkers for over four decades. We provide comprehensive social services and community-building programs through our network of six LGBTQ+ older adult centers across New York City and programs, like SAGEVets, that engage older LGBTQ+ New Yorkers across the state. SAGE also made history for our state, along with our developer partners, in 2020 and 2021 when we opened New York's first LGBTQ+-welcoming elder housing developments located in Brooklyn and The Bronx.

Services for older New Yorkers are more crucial than ever as the population of New Yorkers age 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 However, LGBTQ+ elders are often invisible, disconnected from services, and severely isolated as they are far more likely to live alone and less likely to rely on adult children or other family members for informal caregiving.ⁱⁱ

Because of these 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.ⁱⁱⁱ For many of these LGBTQ+ elders in New York, the services and support systems provided by SAGE are their lifelines.

SAGE continues to evolve and expand to address the widespread disparities facing LGBTQ+ older New Yorkers. During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTQ+ elders have been at the epicenter of this public health crisis not only because of their age, but also high levels underlying health conditions like HIV and diabetes; 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.^{iv} All of these challenges are even further exacerbated for transgender elders and LGBTQ+ older people of color.

In response to the disproportional impact COVID-19 had on our LGBTQ+ elders SAGE pivoted quickly. Throughout the pandemic, our SAGE Centers provided over 100 virtual programs weekly, along with technical support and education, and supported thousands of elders weekly through compassionate phone calls. SAGE Center and care management staff also assisted elders with a variety of emergency needs including addressing social isolation; screening and enrollment in benefits; Medicare, Medicaid, and prescription drug assistance; access to caregiver respite; financial assistance; housing advocacy and navigation; and more. In direct response to LGBTQ+ elders' needs during the pandemic, SAGE developed programs to ameliorate these challenges. One such example is SAGECents, a program developed specifically to improve LGBTQ+ elders' financial stability and reduce economic stress to combat growing financial insecurity among LGBTQ+ elders. We also launched SAGEConnect, a phone-buddy program to match LGBTQ+ elders with volunteers for weekly calls to help address social isolation. More recently, in latter 2021, following clearance from the New York State Department for the Aging, SAGE continues to redesign our program and services delivery to provide a variety of in-person, virtual, and hybrid options.

Stonewall House in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Crotona Pride House in the Tremont neighborhood in The Bronx opened within the past two years and, since their respective openings, have continued to offer on-site services to residents and surrounding community members including providing programming, conducting wellness checks, delivering groceries, and coordinating care with other providers and caregivers. Both developments were built 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 these community members by expanding multi-lingual programming in Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

Our SAGEVets program was created to address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ older veterans, who are twice as likely to face housing insecurity compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers.^v SAGEVets is an innovative statewide program that 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 passage of the New York

Restoration of Honor Act, SAGEVets assists older veterans with discharge upgrades for those 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.

To support the vital programming and services for LGBTQ+ older New Yorkers outlined above, SAGE respectfully requests the following investments in the SFY23 Budget, totaling a restoration of \$710,000 in funding:

- Restoration of \$300,000 to support LGBTQ+ and allied residents in New York State's first LGBTQ+-welcoming 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 and in-person SAGE Center programming, general services, and expenses in operating the ground-floor SAGE Centers located in these buildings.
- Restoration of \$150,000 from the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to increase multi-lingual programming and service offerings. This will allow SAGE to continue to support monolingual Spanish elders at Crotona Pride House as well as monolingual Mandarin and Cantonese speaking residents at Stonewall House.
- Restoration of \$260,000 in funding 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.

Thank you so much for the New York State Legislature's past support and 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+ 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 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562a3197e4b0493d4ffd3105/t/6113ce58c3617a75b357ad4c/1628687962789/Aging+is+Everyones+Business+FINAL+FINAL-min.pdf>

ⁱⁱ AARP NY, “Disrupting Disparities: Solutions for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers 50+,” January 2021 <https://aarp-states.brightspotcdn.com/ca/eb/c2353b1e45b3a7fa0f15991c47a6/disparities-lgbtq-full-final-spread-v4.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Movement Advancement Project, “LGBT Older People & COVID-19,” May 2020 <https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/2020%20LGBTQ%20Older%20Adults%20COVID.pdf>

^{iv} AARP NY, “Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans,” March, 2018 <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/maintaining-dignity-lgbt.html>

^v VA Homeless Programs, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and all sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) people” January 2022 <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/veteran-populations/lgbt.asp>