



Testimony at Joint Assembly and Senate Legislative Hearing Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on New York's Veterans

Delivered virtually by Ashton Stewart, SAGEVets Program Manager, on August 14, 2020

Thank you for holding this Veterans' Committee hearing. My name is Ashton Stewart, and I am the manager of SAGEVets, SAGE's statewide program for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) veterans. Support from New York State has been instrumental to our SAGEVets program – allowing SAGE to engage older LGBT veterans across this great Empire State and making a real difference in the lives of many older LGBT veterans.

New York is home to approximately one million men and women who served their country in the Armed Forces – many of whom are LGBT. When ranked by the number and per capita rate of gay and lesbian veterans, both New York State and New York City are among the top ten states and cities with the highest concentrations of gay and lesbian vets.

According to a survey by the LGBT Health and Human Services Network, 76% of people who identified as veterans were from Upstate New York, and 56% of LGBT veterans were over the age of 50. Many LGBT older veterans in New York State are struggling and yet, are not accessing the services they need. Also, according to the New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network:

- 43% of lesbian, gay and bisexual vets live at under 200% of the Federal Poverty line; for transgender veterans, this number was nearly 60%
- 30% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans were homeless; 46% of transgender vets were homeless
- 34% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans were food insecure; over 61% of transgender vets struggle with food insecurity
- 30% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans and 48% of transgender vets fear discrimination from providers

SAGEVets was created through Initial support from the New York State Assembly, enabling SAGE to identify, support, and improve access to care among LGBT older veterans across the state and respond to their swelling needs.

When the Governor signed the bill into law, Senate sponsor Brad Hoylman said, "According to a study my office conducted in 2015, there are more than 50 New York State benefits denied to LGBTQ veterans who were less than honorably discharged on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Even as gay and lesbian Americans have been able to openly serve in the military for nearly a decade, generations of LGBTQ Americans are still unable to access many veterans' benefits due to the status of their military discharge."

As New York has struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, our state's elders have been forced to endure unimaginable hardships. For LGBT elders and older LGBT veterans, many of whom were already struggling with financial insecurity, food insecurity, acute social isolation, and exacerbating health disparities, COVID-19 has presented mounting challenges. Many of the LGBT older veterans who need help with food, connection, healthcare, or financial security often do not turn to the VA providers who can help for fear of discrimination. This has created a chasm between the need and access to care – one that is especially dangerous in the middle of the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Throughout the pandemic, SAGEVets programming has continued to provide support, information, and referral to elder LGBT veterans. Last year, SAGEVets outreach and program activities reached over 13,000 individuals, 3,185 of whom are veterans.

Isolation is the underlying root of most challenges elder LGBT veterans are currently facing. While the issue of loneliness is something that elder LGBT adults have historically had to face, the current trend of quarantining and working remotely has allowed isolation issues to permeate the entire veteran service safety net. In response to these needs, SAGEVets has conducted vigorous wellness checks among our SAGEVets participants, offered telephonic one-on-one and group support, and launched virtual programming to continue to connect older LGBT veterans to the community. The team is making referrals to remote legal counsel, teletherapy, and health care. Still, unfortunately not all service providers, including the VA, can offer the full suite of services they offered prior to the pandemic. To work around these issues, we have encouraged veterans to keep up with their primary care doctors with virtual check-ins. The Home-Based Primary Care program at the VA has been suspended, leaving especially vulnerable veterans at risk; they can, however, still conduct telephone intakes and screenings.

SAGEVets services are addressing many of these unmet needs. For example, we have conducted wellness checks with over 400 veterans across the Empire State. During these calls, our team assessed veterans' vulnerabilities around isolation, food security, and mental and physical health. For veterans experiencing food insecurity, in partnership with the New York City Department of Veterans' Services, SAGEVets participants were able to receive non-perishable meals and our SAGEVets team connected those in need to a long-term meal delivery program.

For veterans struggling with isolation, we connected these service members to SAGEConnect, a new SAGE initiative links volunteers with LGBT elders for phone support. And, we have continued to offer our weekly Veteran Support Group, facilitated by phone by our SAGEVets Care Manager.

Our SAGEVets program also continued to create and offer inspiring virtual programs. That included a Pride month panel that featured The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Center and the Manhattan VA and was hosted by the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of NYC. The program focused on the evolution of mental health supportive services for LGBT veterans since the repeal of the *Don't Ask Don't Tell*. In another exciting development during Pride month, for the first time ever, SAGEVets was part of the [10th Mountain Division & Fort Drum's LGBT Pride Month Observance program](#), honoring the patriotism of the U.S. military from "LGBT members, past and present, who have fought bravely to protect our nation and ensure a quality for all who call America home."

To lift up the diverse and intersecting identities of our state's LGBT older veterans, SAGEVets was a featured presenter at the *Bedford Stuyvesant 9th Annual Memorial Day Parade (1st virtual)*, hosted by

Black Veterans for Social Justice, Inc. In July, our SAGEVets team delivered remarks at the [Veterans Rally, Because Black Lives Matter!](#), organized by Black Veterans For Social Justice, Inc.

Despite the pandemic, SAGEVets continues to raise the profile of LGBT veterans. Earlier this year SAGEVets helped Senator Brad Hoylman nominate the first transgender veteran to the New York State Senate Veterans Hall of Fame. In [Collecting & Sharing LGBTQ Veteran Stories](#), SAGEVets collaborated with the *Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum*, to address the notable gap in military museums that lack objects and stories from the LGBT veteran experience.

Finally, our SAGEVets program manager took part in a two-part program that focused on the newly enacted *Restoration of Honor Act*, alongside Assemblymember Didi Barrett, the Veteran Advocacy Project and the NYC Veterans Alliance to discuss the impacts of the new law. SAGEVets is proud to be a [community partner with the NYSDVS](#), to help promote and facilitate applications for discharge upgrades, because of the *Restoration of Honor Act*.

We look forward to our continued partnership with you. Please feel share information about our programs and services with your partners and constituents and please reach out if you have further questions about SAGE's ongoing programs and services, during this pandemic and always.