



Testimony to the NYS Assembly Budget Hearing on Housing

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On behalf of SAGE and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) elders we serve, thank you to members of the Assembly for holding this hearing today and allowing me the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of SAGE with respect to the FY22 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.

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.

Further, so many older New Yorkers struggle to remain independent and in their homes. Service-enriched LGBT-friendly housing is crucial for our state's elders, allowing so many to age in place and in community.

In fact, LGBT older people, in particular, 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, 43 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 opened our state's first LGBT-welcoming affordable elder housing Stonewall House in Fort Greene, Brooklyn in 2020 and this year, we will open Crotona Pride House in the East Tremont neighborhood in the Bronx.

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.

In 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-friendly elder housing. Next month, after COVID-19 related construction delays, SAGE and HELP USA will open Crotona Pride House in the Bronx, the second LGBT-friendly elder housing development in the State.

Stonewall House offers 145 100% affordable apartments for low income elders and 25% of the units are housing formerly homeless elders. Crotona Pride House offers 83 LGBT-welcoming affordable apartments and 30% of the units will house chronically homeless elders.

Both Stonewall House and Crotona Pride House feature a ground-floor state-of-the-art SAGE Center, open to residents and members of the surrounding 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.

In both communities, there is an overall dearth of resources for older people, especially LGBT older people in the surrounding communities. As such, SAGE expects serving an influx of elders from the surrounding communities.

The need for services and supports is further exacerbated by the pandemic. LGBT elders are living at the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. All of these challenges are even further exacerbated for transgender elders and LGBT older people of color.

Like all older adult centers in New York, SAGE has not offered in person congregate programming at our six SAGE Centers 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 SAGE Positive and SAGEVets initiatives. Many 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 this public health crisis. 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.

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.

SAGE is grateful for the generous support from New York State in FY21 to provide the care management and support services that LGBT elders and allies in these neighborhoods need and deserve. In FY22, 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 SY22.

Thank you for your enduring support and for your time today.