

AgingToday

the bimonthly newspaper of the American Society on Aging

ISSN: 1043-1284
www.agingtoday.org

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JULY-AUGUST 2011
volume xxxii number 4

Language and LGBT housing: making models that fit all communities

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What language will baby boomers use to describe aging, and how will they accept its challenges? RainbowVision Santa Fe, a community offering active adult, independent, assisted, transitional and respite living services, has been engaged in re-examining and exploring language that adequately describes stages of aging, and the experience of their member residents, since 2004.

RainbowVision Santa Fe opened in June 2006. It was built to offer LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and InterSexed) people an opportunity to live in a community, along with straight allies, in what is now called a Community of Living Diversity. This title was identified and developed by former resident John Rowley, a retired Los Alamos, N.M., scientist, one of the A's (straight allies) in LGBTQI&A. It emerged in a resident member's promotional and marketing workshop luncheon. What was surprising was how member residents experienced and defined the word diversity.

Definitions of Diversity

Members redefined diversity to include professions, former professions, walks of life, age, place-of-origin, culture, family group identification, religion and philosophy. Members thought of diversity as an active state of being rather than a descriptor, and so formulated the concept of Living Diversity. This phrase became the tagline for RainbowVision. Exploring such concepts provides a way to see what this aging LGBT community experience might have to offer the mainstream elder-care industry.

The demographics of RainbowVision Santa Fe break down like this: 52% female to 48% male, and orientation is LGBT at 60% to 40% non-LGBT. There are also a significant number of LGBT people who have chosen RainbowVision to care for their straight loved ones because of its acceptance of differing family structures, which allows for comfortable family gatherings and celebrations.

The LGBTQI population has experienced unique historical circumstances that influence how they age. One is the advent of the 1980s AIDS crisis. Many gay men at RainbowVision Santa Fe have often remarked that they feel like they are the miracles of their generation in that they are alive at all, which demonstrates that end-of-life issues are not necessarily age-related. Because of that, RainbowVision Santa Fe is not age-restricted, and includes those ages 28 through 99.

Age restrictions commonly found in the industry largely have to do with obtaining loans through HUD for those older than age 62 or from banks for projects allowing those older than age 55, as well as with resident preference in terms of living with or near children. Without such restrictions,

RainbowVision is able to accept members of various ages who may present with the challenges of MS, lupus, cancer and Parkinson's disease, to name a few. So do all or some of these factors influence mainstream aging issues, communities or services?

Lessons for Other Communities

Serving the elderly LGBTQI population may influence mainstream aging services in two major ways: by redefining what constitutes family; and by refining the language of aging so that challenges may be served in a timely fashion. Since the more senior portion of the LGBTQI population was often shunned by their biological families, families of choice were created for caretaking purposes, as well as for general support. Peers often served in this capacity, and older generations served in the role of mother or parent to younger generations.

Today's mainstream baby boomers often have family members who have moved a considerable distance from their point of origin. Daily life happens within friendship groups, which serve as family in terms of influence, reliability and support for many major life decisions. This function focuses the decision-making process oftentimes on the end-user of services, rather than on the traditional influencers (oldest daughter as caretaker) and parallels the LGBT historical experience.

If we are to directly appeal to the client or potential resident of a community, and end-of-life issues are not necessarily related to age, then the experience gleaned from LGBT history asks us to find a word that encompasses more than the words "senior," "elderly" or "aging." With aging denial deeply embedded in baby boomer culture ("don't trust anyone over 30"), the RainbowVision community is moving away from the word "aging," since we are all aging the minute we are born, and substituting the word "evolving" instead. This may be the largest contribution we make. ■

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