Developing LGBT Inclusion within the Aging Network: Lessons Learned – Applying an Urban Model to a Rural Setting

This summary is provided by the Michigan LGBT & Aging Initiative (2017-2018). This two-year project, organized and developed by a partnership between members of SAGE Metro Detroit and the ACLU of Michigan, sought to reduce isolation and improve care to LGBT older adults in three rural Michigan regions by replicating a successful Detroit-area collaborative pilot project between local LGBT service organizations and the Area Agencies on Aging. The project was made possible by a grant from the Michigan Health Endowment Fund. For additional information about this initiative, please contact Project Director, Kathleen LaTosch at klotosch@gmail.com.

The agency-related objectives of the original Detroit initiative included:

1. Adopting LGBT-inclusive non-discrimination policies at each Area Agency on Aging.
2. Updating information gathering processes and protocols, including database variables and answer choices for accurate and easy data collection and reporting.
3. Training Area Agency on Aging staff to sensitively identify LGBT callers and make appropriate referrals.

In addition to the objectives listed above, two additional objectives were identified as critical for the rural replication initiative’s success:

4. Building relationships between each Area Agency on Aging and its local LGBT community.
5. Identifying LGBT-affirming aging service providers and other referrals.

While addressing these additional objectives, new challenges and complexities arose (discussed below). And although additional differences exist in comparing how to implement LGBT-inclusiveness in an urban setting vs. a rural setting, three themes arose that will be discussed in more depth here: Building Relationships, Resources, and Faith-based Challenges.
Building Relationships

A specific objective focused on building relationships so that urban-based organizers could best support rural regions in developing resources. In the pilot project, organizers were essentially working “in their own backyard” – coming from a local LGBTQ community organization while with the rural project, the same organizers were transplanting themselves into other parts of the state. Once the project was complete, it was essential that local Area Agencies on Aging have strong relationships and contacts with their own local LGBTQ community in order to continue developing services and be responsive to the unique needs and concerns of the LGBT older adults living in their areas. This took on one primary complication:

*Not all rural regions have a formally organized LGBTQ community.* Even if the region has a university with an LGBTQ resource center, it typically focuses on the needs of young people, not older adults. This led to the question: *How do you build relationships with the LGBTQ community when there is no formal organization?* A number of strategies were developed:

- Reach out to any LGBTQ-themed organizations in your area and begin to identify a list of informal and/or voluntary LGBTQ community leaders. While their focus may not be LGBT elders, they may be able to refer you to interested people in the community. Possible organizations to check:
  - PFLAG - [https://www.pflag.org/](https://www.pflag.org/)
  - LGBTQ-Affirming/welcoming Congregations such as Unitarian Universalist or Metropolitan Community Church - [https://www.gaychurch.org/find_a_church/](https://www.gaychurch.org/find_a_church/)
  - Facebook and online LGBTQ resources – search online by location.
  - College / university diversity departments and other multicultural programs
  - Employer affinity groups
  - LGBTQ community centers - [https://www.lgbtcenters.org/](https://www.lgbtcenters.org/)
  - Nonprofit organizations with LGBTQ-identified staff
- After identifying local individuals, invite them to meet with you and share your work as an aging service provider. Ask for their help in providing LGBTQ-inclusive services.
- Once you have begun to establish relationships and interest, form an informal network of local LGBTQ individuals and ask their help in the development of services.

*Our Solution*

In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, we networked with an all-volunteer LGBTQ group with a very low budget whose primary function was organizing one annual pride event for the region. We also identified, through many conversations, that a local senior service agency was directed by a member of the LGBTQ community. Together, these individuals formed an informal LGBTQ network in our initiative with the local Area Agency on Aging to develop inclusive services for LGBT older adults.
Resources

Another specific challenge that emerged was a significant difference in resources – types, amounts and distribution of resources.

Aging Services. In terms of aging services and supports, when it comes to an urban setting, there are three different Area Agencies on Aging serving the Detroit Metropolitan area – a 7 county region. In that same area, hundreds if not thousands of organizations exist to assist and provide services specifically to older adults, including housing (along the spectrum from independent living to nursing care), meal services, transportation resources, in-home care services and more. The population is much more dense as well, making the transportation of goods, services and people more efficient. Those seeking services often have the option of choosing from more than one provider in their area based on their personal preferences. In rural regions, a single Area Agency on Aging may be providing service for more than ten counties. Sometimes that agency is wearing multiple hats – serving not only older adults but other target groups as well. Sometimes aging services are provided as one program of a much larger organization. Staffing resources are limited and participating on a committee for this work is more difficult. Travel is time-consuming, expensive and limits access to resources.

The LGBTQ Community. In urban areas, there are frequently many places and spaces that serve LGBTQ individuals – including community centers, bookstores, LGBTQ-affirming churches, university programs, civil rights organizations and more. In rural areas, there are frequently no formally established LGBTQ organizations and if there are, they may not have a budget, paid staff or an office or phone number to call. They may exist only as a Facebook page with monthly potluck gatherings. This makes connecting with and reaching LGBT older adults all the more challenging, not to mention engaging LGBTQ community members in this work. Having no budget makes participation even more challenging for these groups and individuals – financial and shared resources become very important.

Our Solution. In this initiative, we shared resources to the maximum extent possible. Following are some of the ways in which we shared resources in an effort to offset challenges:

- All participating organizations shared in the grant funds and received stipends for participating.
- Video conference meetings were held 8 times per year / with the 4 in-person meetings providing reimbursement for travel expenses.
- All participating organizations were offered staff training, sample language and other technical assistance needed to adopt necessary changes.
- All participating organizations shared in the marketing / PR efforts, created a shared communications strategy, website and print materials to reduce cost and maximize reach and used existing conference attendance schedules to distribute materials.
Faith-Based Challenges

While not exclusive to rural populations, one common challenge in doing this work is responding to staff or other clients about why it is important to serve LGBT older adults and how to serve LGBT older adults when “my religion tells me that being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is wrong.” This particular challenge came up more frequently in rural populations possibly due to the fact that there are simply fewer providers available and many of them are run by faith-based institutions.

As of July 2018, in Michigan and in many parts of the country, legislation is pending or has passed that allows individuals to refuse service to LGBTQ individuals if it goes against their religious beliefs. Individual staff members who work for organizations may claim this to be true for them in refusing service to LGBT older adults and/or refusing training to best serve LGBT older adults.

Our Solution. This initiative was predicated on the belief that all older adults deserve to be treated with dignity and respect by their care providers. Ensuring that services provided are safe and affirming is necessary when serving LGBT older adults since research shows that LGBT older adults face mistreatment and discrimination in healthcare and in aging services – because of their identity. In our initiative, we found the best solution was for agencies to be proactive in their adoption of LGBTQ-affirming values and to be transparent with board, staff and clients about those values. Some ways this was approached in this initiative:

- All Area Agencies on Aging agreed to include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in their non-discrimination policies.
- All AAA Executive Directors agreed to make a verbal statement to their all staff meetings about their support for serving LGBT older adults with dignity and respect.
- All AAAs agreed to provide training to staff.

It is also helpful to have a prepared statement that responds to the question, “why are you serving LGBT people?” that may come from other clients. One sample statement is: “We believe that all older adults deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and recognize that each person is unique. We strive to provide the very best service to each individual according to their unique needs.”

Created July 23, 2018. For more information about the Michigan LGBT & Aging Initiative, contact Project Director Kathleen LaTosch at klatosch@gmail.com

1 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) was used intentionally by project-specific references and in all references specifically to older adults out of respect for a generational distaste for the word “queer.” LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) was used in references to the larger community not restrictive to older adults, as was the language culture in Michigan as of July 2018.