

Business information and analysis about Seniors Housing

Providers Rise to New Standards for LGBT Senior Living

December 5, 2017 by [Carlo Calma](#)



Head north on Halsted Street in Chicago's Boystown neighborhood—just one block of Wrigley Field—and you'll see it: a modern, multi-unit residence decked in green and blue hues. No, this isn't a new condominium for the city's young, urban professionals, but rather an affordable housing unit that has become a haven for the city's low-income older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) residents.

Established in 2014, the Town Hall Apartments is a 79-unit, independent affordable housing owned and operated by Center on Halsted (CoH), an LGBT community center in Chicago, as well as Heartland Alliance, a Chicago-based non-profit whose work fights against homelessness and poverty.

Since opening two years ago, the community has been at full occupancy and its waitlist has closed. This apparent high demand really speaks to the need for this type of housing for the city's older LGBT population—which currently has a census of approximately 40,000, according to Britta Larson, director of senior services at CoH.

“Realistically, we’ll never be able to build enough ‘Town Hall Apartments,’” Larson told Senior Housing News. “At the end of the day, we really need our community partners and referral resources, and all of the existing aging service providers to become more LGBT competent and LGBT friendly.”

The efforts by CoH in creating the offering for local LGBT older adults has gained national attention, being included in the Top 15 [LGBT-friendly](#) senior living communities in the U.S. The rankings were released Tuesday by SeniorAdvice, an online resource that connects consumers to senior living and senior care options.

The rankings show that the growing demand to address the needs of LGBT older adults is not confined to Chicago but across the country, as providers begin to take steps to achieve this goal.

An invisible population

For this reason, the New York-based Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) established its SAGECare training program for seniors housing and senior care providers, centered on LGBT cultural competency.

The needs of the aging LGBT population is often ignored, according to Tim Johnston, director of national projects at SAGE.

“This is a population that is very often invisible, either because people haven’t considered their needs or, what is often the case, is that they are afraid of encountering discriminatory behavior and bias, so they are closeted,” Johnston told SHN. “So, aging providers don’t understand they’re working with LGBT older adults because their LGBT constituents are afraid to self-identify.”

Overcoming this mentality is the goal of the SAGECare program, as it provides best practices on how senior care providers can approach LGBT patients and address their needs.

“[The program provides] best practices to know the right things to say, know the right way to ask certain questions, know the right kind of policy prescriptions to help create an inclusive environment,” Johnston said. “The training work is really intended to give [caregivers] those concrete skills to send people the message that if they would like to self-disclose, they would be safe and supported in doing so.”

SAGECare involves a four-hour intensive training for upper management, as well as one-hour in-person/online training programs for frontline caregivers and staff. The program has varying levels of designations: a bronze-level indicates that 25% of a community or provider’s staff has undergone training, while a platinum designation shows that 80% of staff has been trained under the program.

Topics range from bias reduction to programs that center on transgender aging, according to Johnston.

Since its inception last May, the program has trained approximately 20,000 frontline care providers, with more than 150 agencies receiving a SAGECare credential, he added.

“The credential is a way for the service provider to distinguish themselves from others to say we’ve made a commitment to invest our resources and our staff time in this training because the [older LGBT population] is important to us,” Johnston said. “It’s a very public way of making that commitment known.”

Measurable experiences

Out west, Tucson, Arizona-based Watermark Retirement Communities aims to communicate this commitment by pursuing the SAGECare platinum credential.

So far, five of its communities within the region, totaling roughly 600 associates, have undergone SAGECare training, according to Shannon Ruedlinger, managing director at Watermark. By next year, the senior living provider aims to have its remaining 46 communities trained under the program.

“We want to make sure that we have some other measurable experiences and training from an organization like SAGE to guide us in the right direction as we move our company and culture to be inclusive,” Ruedlinger told SHN.

Since training some of its associates, Ruedlinger explained that staff have become more adept in addressing the care needs of LGBT patients, as well as their families.

The training program doesn’t apply to just seniors housing providers but to other providers in the senior care industry, including home care.

This includes the New York-based in-home care provider Visiting Nurse Services of New York (VNSNY), who is also seeking a platinum credential from the training program, according to Richard Rothstein, vice president of corporate communications at VNSNY.

“Our people have been trained what not to say, how to initiate a conversation, how to create a welcoming and safe place for an LGBT patient so that the LGBT patient is comfortable speaking openly and honestly about their family and living situation, their partners,” Rothstein told SHN.

A very real fear

Back in Chicago, Larson and the staff at Town Hall Apartments are actively working to ensure that residents are receiving the care resources they need.

At Town Hall, residents pay 30% of their income to live in the community, while an on-site case manager connects them with care resources, like physicians and even in-home care services.

Apart from these efforts, Larson is also working to make sure that local senior care providers are aware of the unique needs of aging LGBT adults.

“Because Town Hall is so affirming ... there is a very real fear that wherever they move might not be as affirming or as accepting,” she said. “So, we want to work with local senior care providers who can provide increased levels of care to our seniors.”

While the SAGECare training program is a step in the right direction to address the needs of older LGBT adults, creating more housing options for the population is another issue that needs to be addressed—an area where senior living providers can prove helpful, according to Kelly Kent, director of national housing initiative at SAGE.

“I think more developers could really add a great deal of value to this discussion by stepping forward with their expertise in housing development and partnering with LGBT service providers in developing affordable housing that is LGBT friendly,” Kent said.

Written by [Carlo Calma](#)

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