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Gay Seniors Fear Housing Discrimination

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updated 12/29/2011 4:31:52 PM ET2011-12-29T21:31:52

PHILADELPHIA — At age 62, Donald Carter knows his arthritis and other age-related infirmities will not allow him to live indefinitely in his third-floor walk-up apartment in Philadelphia.

But as a low-income renter, Carter has limited options. And as a gay black man, he's concerned his choice of senior living facilities might be narrowed further by the possibility of intolerant residents or staff members.

"The system as it stands is not very accommodating," Carter said. "I don't really want to see any kind of negative attitude or lack of service because anyone ... is gay or lesbian."

Experts say many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender seniors fear discrimination, disrespect or worse by [health care](#) workers and residents of elder housing facilities — ultimately leading many back into the closet after years of being open.

That anxiety takes on new significance as the first of the 77 million baby boomers turns 65 this year. At least 1.5 million seniors are gay, a number expected to double by 2030, according to SAGE, the New York-based group Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders. Recognizing the need, developers in Philadelphia have secured a site and initial funding for what would be one of the nation's few GLBT-friendly affordable housing facilities. They hope to break ground on a 52-unit, \$17 million building in 2013.

Anti-discrimination laws prohibit gay-only housing, but projects can be made GLBT-friendly through marketing and location. And while private retirement facilities targeted at the gay community exist, such residences are often out of reach for all but the wealthiest seniors. Census figures released last week indicate about 49 percent of Americans over 65 could be considered poor or low-income.

Gays are also less likely to have biological family to help out with informal caregiving, either through estrangement or being childless, making them more dependent on outside services. And that makes them more vulnerable, SAGE executive director Michael Adams said.

"They cannot at all assume that they will be treated well or given the welcome mat," he said. Cities including San Francisco and Chicago also have projects on the drawing board. But the first and, so far, only affordable housing complex for gay elders to be built in the United States is Triangle Square-Hollywood in Los Angeles.

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Open since 2007, the \$22 million facility has 104 units available to any low-income senior 62 and over, gay or straight, according to executive director Mark Supper. Residents pay monthly rent on a sliding scale, from about \$200 to \$800, depending on their income. About 35 units are set aside for seniors with HIV/AIDS and for those at risk of becoming homeless, Supper said.

The Triangle's population is about 90 percent GLBT and it has a waiting list of about 200 people. The project's developer, Gay & Lesbian Elder Housing, plans to build a second facility in Southern California in the next 18 months, Supper said.

But what took so long for the need to be recognized? Chris Bartlett, executive director of the GLBT William Way Center in Philadelphia, noted that advocates spent the better part of two decades devoting their energy to programs for those affected by HIV or AIDS, which were decimating the gay community.

While AIDS remains a priority, Bartlett said, the crisis mentality has passed and allowed the community to focus on other things. He said he looks forward to the Way Center providing social services at the planned Philadelphia senior housing facility, in a sense repaying those who led the gay liberation movement.

"Don't we owe it to them ... to ensure that they have an experience as elders that's worthy of what they gave to our community?" Bartlett said.

The Philadelphia group has been trying to get its project off the ground for about eight years but has been stymied by location problems, a tough economy and stiff competition for federal housing tax credits.

Rejected once for the credits, developers recently reapplied and hope for a different answer this spring, said Mark Segal, director of the Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld Fund, which is spearheading the project. It's planned for a thriving section of the city affectionately known as the Gayborhood.

"I'm extremely optimistic," said Segal, also publisher of the Philadelphia Gay News.

However, Adams said the real solution lies not only in building more facilities, but in cultural competency training for staffers at existing elder programs. The Philadelphia Corporation on Aging, the private nonprofit that serves the city's seniors, began offering such seminars to health care workers a couple of years ago, said Tom Shea, the agency's director of training. "They're going to be seeing a diverse slice of the aging population in Philadelphia ... and we need to be sensitive to all their needs," Shea said.

Adams suggested that discrimination faced by today's GLBT elders could diminish in the decades ahead, since he said opinion research shows that younger generations are less likely to harbor anti-gay biases than older generations.

"So we hope that the passage of time will provide part of the solution," he said. "But of course, today's LGBT elders can't wait for that."

Jackie Adams, 54, of Philadelphia, said being diagnosed with AIDS many years ago meant she never thought she'd live long enough to need elder housing. But now Adams, who was born male and lives as a female, is part of a local initiative focused on GLBT senior issues. On a limited income after losing her job as an outreach worker for those with HIV, Adams said affordable, GLBT-friendly senior housing is badly needed. She is not related to Michael Adams.

"I would be incomplete if I had to go from wearing stockings and dresses to (work boots) and jeans," Adams said. "I would like to be able to live in a community where I could fully be me."