

LGBT Elders Pose Major Challenge for Geriatrics and Senior Services

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Aging expert Amber Hollibaugh will visit UCSF on April 2 to discuss one of the major challenges facing geriatrics and senior services: the first generation of “out” lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) elders.

Hollibaugh’s talk on Wednesday, April 2, will be at 5:30 p.m. in Medical Sciences Building, room S 214. The talk will be sponsored by UCSF LGBT Resources, UCSF Geriatric Interest Group and UCSF Division of Geriatrics.

During her appearance at UCSF, Hollibaugh, a longtime LGBT activist, author and filmmaker, will be joined by representatives from three groundbreaking local organizations addressing the needs of LGBT elders: Openhouse, Lavender Seniors and New Leaf.

“The first time I heard Amber talk about what’s happening for LGBT seniors, I was riveted,” says Shane Snowdon, UCSF LGBT Resources director. “I had no idea how many problems they face — and how urgently those problems need to be addressed.”

Hollibaugh, a senior strategist for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is a leading spokesperson for LGBT aging issues, which are beginning to receive widespread attention. As she noted in testimony to the White House Conference on Aging, “The impact of the history of discrimination and anti-gay bigotry, heterosexism, homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia, as well as the ignorance of mainstream providers surrounding LGBT elder concerns and issues, creates tremendous barriers to services for LGBT seniors.”

These barriers take a serious toll, Hollibaugh continued. “When LGBT seniors have to access mainstream senior services, many feel they must go back into the closet to do so. If their identity is too obvious to be made invisible, they face bigotry, targeting and discrimination. But when they remain invisible, their plight is further complicated because the majority of mainstream providers assume that all the old people they serve are straight. This assumption informs their programming and social service delivery, provides the language for their intake, frames the discussion of relationships, life reminiscing, and a whole host of other programming activities up to and including discussions of death and dying.”

All of these factors, Hollibaugh noted, “serve to marginalize and alienate the 3 million-plus LGBT seniors across the nation.”

In fact, recent research indicates that LGBT seniors are five times less likely to access senior services than the general senior population.

Yet senior services can be critically important to LGBT elders. Research indicates that, compared with straight counterparts, LGBT seniors are twice as likely to be single, four and a half times more likely to have no children to call upon in time of need, and two and a half times more likely to live alone.