

LGBTQ Issues in Caregiving

By Sandy Davenport, MSW

There are many issues specific to LGBTQ older adults that shape the challenges caregivers may face.

“Providing long-term care for a friend or loved one can feel overwhelming. And lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) caregivers may be dealing with a host of additional issues, from healthcare laws and policies that prioritize legal and biological family, to a lack of resources that address their particular issues.” (SAGE, Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders, Caregiver Resources, 2016).

LGBTQ older adults may have a long history of facing discrimination and prejudice. This may mean they feel unsafe when receiving or coordinating care from home health staff, in hospitals, in assisted living, rehab, and nursing home settings. The client and/or caregiver may feel the need to remain “in the closet,” i.e., hidden regarding their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. If remaining invisible in this way, their health care providers may not fully understand their medical and other needs, and may not have a picture of the whole person, which is essential to providing optimal care. The caregiver may feel blocked from giving the whole picture, if unsure about the response medical providers will give. **(This is why PCOA provides *Project Visibility* trainings, to improve the culture of care for LGBTQ elders.)**

Same sex couples have relatively recently been given the right to legal marriage. Many health and supportive care settings have begun recognizing the rights of same sex partners to be involved in care planning. Having advance directives in place (namely a completed Healthcare Power of Attorney form and Living Will) can be crucial to confirming who will be making decisions if the client cannot do so themselves. (PCOA can help with this.) This is especially important with same sex partners, since there are many stories of biological family pushing the long-time partner aside, when decisions are needed at times of crisis.

Some LGBTQ caregivers feel invisible, when dealing with staff that are caring for their partner or spouse, as relegated to the status of “friend,” instead of family. This adds to the stress of already difficult medical care planning, may discourage caregivers from expecting helpful outcomes, and contribute to resulting health disparities for the care recipients. Caregivers can consider screening prospective health providers, home health agencies, and long-term care communities, by asking in advance if they have brought LGBTQ culturally responsive training to staff, made their non-discrimination policies include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and taken other steps to be LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive.

LGBTQ caregivers may be caring for family or others who are not LGBTQ. Finding the support and resources they need may feel daunting. PCOA’s Caregiver Support Groups that are LGBTQ-aware and welcoming are an important tool to reduce the stress of caregiving. We can also help with arranging respite so that the caregiver can have some needed breaks.

PCOA has Caregiver Specialists, well versed in the needs of LGBTQ caregivers, available for no-cost consultations by phone or in person, on the full range of resources, possible subsidies, and options for support. LGBTQ caregivers do not have to feel alone and isolated when facing the demands of caregiving.