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East Bay survey assesses views on LGBT elder needs

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A small but groundbreaking survey of seniors and caregivers at two facilities in the East Bay has revealed mostly positive attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders.

But advocates say the study, believed to be the first of its kind in Alameda County, also confirmed the need for staff training on how to address LGBT issues for what is a growing number of elders who are open about their sexual orientation.

"The Bay Area has more progressive attitudes but that doesn't translate into more knowledge," said Mickey Eliason, an associate professor at San Francisco State University who acted as the principal researcher. "Yes, we are more accepting, but we haven't had the education."

In collaboration with Lavender Seniors of the East Bay/Tides Center, Gil Gerald & Associates Inc. surveyed 92 caregivers and 64 elders at facilities in Oakland and Berkeley as part of a study called the LGBT Elder Needs Assessment Project.

The survey, conducted in January and February, found the majority of staff were comfortable with LGBT clients even though three-quarters of respondents reported having no formal training about handling needs specific to that community. Only between 1 and 7 percent of staff were concerned about working with LGBT patients, with the highest levels of discomfort expressed about bisexual or transgender people.

One staff member remarked, "I don't have any problems with (LGBT people) as long as they

don't try to touch me in an inappropriate manner" -- a comment surveyors said demonstrates the need to

address stereotypes.

"We're in a different era," Eliason said. "Now we have a population that is more likely to be out and trained in political advocacy and more demanding of their rights. We want health care providers to be ready for that."

The survey found that 94 percent of respondents at Salem Lutheran Home and 87 percent at the Center for Elders' Independence -- the two facilities where the voluntary questionnaires were given -- were comfortable being among LGBT seniors. Only two survey takers openly said they didn't approve of LGBT people.

Dan Ashbrook, director of Lavender Seniors, a nonprofit that found grant money for the survey, chose Salem Lutheran to participate because he knew there were LGBT staff. He knew the home, located near Oakland's Dimond District, would be a safe place to test out what could be an emotionally and politically sensitive questionnaire.

"I knew that would be a good impact on the project," he said of the home's welcoming of LGBT clients.

Ninety-seven percent of Salem respondents said the agency should be inclusive of LGBT people, and 87 percent said the same at CEI day centers in downtown Oakland, East Oakland and Berkeley.

Gilbert Carrasco, executive director of Salem Lutheran, said, "The community was already relatively open," considering the changes the 87-year-old facility has gone through to become more



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welcoming of all faiths, not just Lutheran.

"We're an all-faith based community, and our core mission and values state about celebrating the inherent worth of each individual," he said. "We keep expanding the diverse population and it seems to be a next natural fit for us to educate and change."

Of the clients surveyed at Salem and the three CEI centers, 3 percent reported being gay men and one indicated being bisexual. Of the staff, 12 percent reported being gay men or lesbian and 5 percent reported being bisexual.

Researchers acknowledged the survey likely doesn't reflect the full range of attitudes among staff members because it only represented 26 percent of the total 350-member workforce at the facilities who participated. Researchers surmised that staff with negative feelings about LGBT people probably avoided taking the survey.

"The big problem in this research is when you have voluntary surveys, people with negative attitudes dismiss it," Eliason said. "Seventy-five percent who are not doing the survey, we don't know what they think or what their knowledge or attitudes are."

Despite the low participation rate, responses did demonstrate that caregivers have little knowledge about how to deal with LGBT seniors or family members. Lavender Seniors will design training for administrators and front-line staff about bathing and other forms of personal assistance, as well as handling legal issues and communication with lesbian or gay partners of clients or their next of kin.

Jack Berry, an 85-year-old retired professor from Texas who recently moved into Salem Lutheran, has a daughter and granddaughter who are lesbian. He was delighted by the survey because it acknowledges the desire among agencies to serve diverse families.

"They hit it right on," he said. "It's going to be more and more needed."

Project findings

Key findings among staff surveyed in the LGBT Elder Needs Assessment Project:

- 66 percent valued the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity and celebrated the

differences

- 84 percent said their workplaces were safe for LGBT people
- 6 percent felt that LGBT people were OK, but should not talk openly about their sexuality or gender;
- 7 percent reported that minority sexual and gender identities were against their religious or moral beliefs;
- 32 percent had often or sometimes heard LGBT negative comments in the workplace

