

San Mateo nonprofit offers free counseling services to LGBT seniors

By Bonnie Eslinger
Daily News Staff Writer

Although she had spent a lifetime not telling the people around her that she was gay, the secret became too much to bear for one San Mateo County woman after she retired and began having health problems. Her same-sex partner was taking care of her, but she had no one else.

"Basically they were so fearful of being out, they didn't develop a lot of close friends," said Eilyn Bloomfield of the nonprofit Family Service Agency. "Now that she has health problems, she could use the companionship outside of her primary relationship, it's a lot to burden your partner with."

The woman found some of the support she was looking for at the Family Service Agency through a peer-counseling program that focuses on the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults, 55 years and older.

"For her to come to the group and meet other people was a major step," said Bloomfield, who coordinates LGBT services for the nonprofit.

Numerous issues surface when a person begins to age; for LGBT seniors these issues are compounded with the problems that come as a result of their sexual orientation.

According to a report released in March at the national conference of the American Society on Aging held in Chicago, LGBT elders struggle with the impacts of a lifetime of social stigma, have fewer biological family and relatives related by marriage and face inequitable laws that create barriers to financial security and better health.

Francisco has a reputation as a haven for the LGBT community, that acceptance doesn't extend into San Mateo County, Bloomfield said.

"There's no safe neighborhood like in San Francisco," she said.

The result is that many more adults in San Mateo County, particularly seniors, are closeted, Bloomfield said.

Some may have come out at some point to their family — a usual base of support — only to be disowned or told they were "sick," Bloomfield said. And while adults traditionally turn to their children for assistance as they get older, gay men and women are less likely to have children to take on that role.

And even when they have committed partners willing to be caregivers, gay elders often face prejudices and obstacles when they try to access health services, Bloomfield said.

Senior centers, a common place of support for the elderly, frequently hold the stronger prejudices of previous generations against gay and lesbians. A 1994 study of Area Agencies on Aging, the local agencies established to administer funds under the federal Older Americans Act, found that 50 percent of senior centers funded by AAA believed gay men and lesbians would not be welcome if their sexual orientation were known.

The number of gay men and women participating in the senior counseling program at the Family Service Agency has ranged from "as few as three and as many as nine" during the last year, Bloomfield said. They are mostly women.

Bloomfield works to get the word out about the program, finding most clients through LGBT groups connected through e-mail lists. To qualify for the free counseling service at the Family Service Agency's offices in San Mateo, LGBT adults must reside in San Mateo County and be 55 years or older.

Bloomfield, who is also gay, encourages LGBT seniors to reach out.

"On one level these are brave and courageous people, (but) they've been so wounded by being considered sick or sinners," she said. "So they've remained in the closet and that has created a world of isolation."

FYI

WHAT: The Family Service Agency provides free counseling services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults who are 55 years old and older.

WHERE: 24 2nd Ave., San Mateo

CONTACT: Howard Lader, 650-403-4300 Ext. 4322

MORE INFO: <http://tinyurl.com/LGBTsupport>