

The Daily News (Kamloops)

LGBT seniors facing challenges

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Kamloops' gay and lesbian senior citizens have come a long way in the last five decades. And they still have a way to go as they move into retirement homes.

It's been a long struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) Canadians. As youths, homosexuals were told they had a disease, or that being gay or lesbian was a fad like bell-bottom jeans that they would grow out of. They were ridiculed and humiliated for acting naturally. Bisexuals were regarded as sinners and transsexuals as freaks. No wonder LGBT youths were reluctant to come out of the closet.

But come out they did. Canadians eventually realized that being LGBT was not an affliction but part of the rainbow of human sexuality.

There are about 1,200 LGBT senior citizens in Kamloops, according to national statistics. Seven to 10 per cent of Canadians are LGBT and 15 per cent of those are over 65. Hundreds of LGBT Kamloopians could be forced back into the closet if retirement homes aren't made more welcoming. Fortunately for Kamloops' seniors facilities, a plan exists.

"Shoshana" dreads going into a retirement centre. At about age seven, she realized that a terrible mistake had been made: she had been born into a man's body. Shoshana had spent decades coming to terms with the conflict of her gender and sex.

She told CBC Radio of one horror story she had heard of where an aging, transgendered woman who had recently moved into a retirement home suffered a humiliating experience when insensitive nurses flocked in bemusement to view her penis.

The City of Toronto has mapped out a plan, a first for North America. LGBT seniors don't have to live a lie again. The first step is recognition that LGBT seniors exist. One manager of a Kamloops' facility told me that as far as he knew: "there are no gays or lesbians in our centre." It sounds so '50s, when today's LGBT seniors were tormented teenagers, hiding in the closet and invisible to society.

For LGBT seniors to feel at home, sensitivity training for staff and volunteers is a good start. That's just the beginning of the process in Toronto's pamphlet. Others include a welcoming environment created by posters that illustrate same-sex couples, the rainbow flag, brochures and newsletters about events in the LGBT community.

The pamphlet explains how non-discrimination policies should be clearly displayed and verbally explained during tours of the facility. Written forms should not assume heterosexuality as the norm; the term partner used rather than husband/wife; broad definitions of family made to include "family of choice."

All residents, not just staff and volunteers, should be encouraged to make LGBT residents at ease. This can be done informally or through "gay-straight alliances." It will take leadership from the straight community.

And LGBT communities are not monolithic. Contrary to the impressions left by gay-pride parades, not all flaunt their sexuality. Some feel comfortable enough to be fully out, while others prefer privacy.

The frailty of aging complicates the lives of LGBT seniors. They need assurance that they won't face the victimization and misinformation of earlier decades. It will take more than good intentions. LGBT seniors are more likely to be victimized than their straight peers, even as straight seniors are at greater risk than others.

B.C. needs political leadership like that provided in Ontario. "We have to make sure that if you go into a long-term care facility, you're not forced back into the closet," declared Ontario's Minister of Health George Smitherman.

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