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Gay-friendly senior housing

By KATHY MATHESON

MANY gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) seniors fear discrimination, disrespect, or worse, by health care workers and residents of elder housing facilities, ultimately leading many back into the closet after years of being open, experts say.

That anxiety takes on new significance as the first of the 77 million baby boomers in the United States turn 65 this year. At least 1.5 million seniors are gay, a number expected to double by 2030, according to, the New York-based group Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE).

Recognising the need, developers in Philadelphia have secured a site and initial funding for what would be one of the nation's few GLBT-friendly affordable housing facilities. They hope to break ground on a 52-unit, US\$17mil (RM527mil) building in 2013.

Anti-discrimination laws prohibit gay-only housing, but projects can be made GLBT-friendly through marketing and location. And while private retirement facilities targeted at the gay community exist, such homes are often out of reach for all but the wealthiest seniors.

Census figures released in the United States recently indicate about 49% of Americans over 65 could be considered poor or low-income.

Gays are also less likely to have biological family to help with informal caregiving, either through estrangement or being childless, making them more dependent on outside services. That makes them more vulnerable, SAGE executive director Michael

Adams says. "They cannot at all assume that they will be treated well or given the welcome mat."

Cities including San Francisco and Chicago also have projects planned. But the first and, so far, only affordable housing complex for gay elders in the United States is Triangle Square-Hollywood in Los Angeles.

Open since 2007, the US\$22mil (RM682mil) facility has 104 units available to any low-income seniors 62 and over, gay or straight, according to executive director Mark Supper. Residents pay monthly rent on a sliding scale, from about US\$200 (RM620) to US\$800 (RM2,480), depending on their income. About 35 units are set aside for seniors with HIV/AIDS and for those at risk of becoming homeless.

The Triangle's population is about 90% GLBT and it has a waiting list of about 200 people. The project's developer, Gay & Lesbian Elder Housing, plans to build a second facility in Southern California in the next 16 months, Supper says.

Chris Bartlett, executive director of the GLBT William Way Centre in Philadelphia, notes that advocates spent the better part of two decades devoting their energy to programmes for those affected by HIV or AIDS, which were decimating the gay community.

While AIDS remains a priority, Bartlett says, the crisis mentality has passed and allowed the community to focus on other things. He looks forward to the Way Centre providing social services at the planned Philadelphia senior housing facility, in a sense repaying those who led the gay liberation movement.

"Don't we owe it to them ... to ensure that they have an experience as elders that's wor-

thy of what they gave to our community?"

Adams says the real solution lies not only in building more facilities, but in cultural competency training for staffers at existing elder programmes.

The Philadelphia Corporation on Ageing, the private non-profit that serves the city's seniors, began offering such seminars to healthcare workers a couple of years ago, adds Tom Shea, the agency's director of training. "They're going to be seeing a diverse slice of the ageing population in Philadelphia ... and we need to be sensitive to all their needs."

Adams suggests that discrimination faced by today's GLBT elders could diminish in the decades ahead, since opinion research shows that younger generations are less likely to harbour anti-gay biases than older generations.

"So we hope that the passage of time will provide part of the solution. But of course, today's GLBT elders can't wait for that."

Jackie Adams, 54, says being diagnosed with AIDS many years ago meant she never thought she'd live long enough to need elder housing. But now Adams, who was born male and lives as a female, is part of a local initiative focused on GLBT senior issues.

On a limited income after losing her job as an outreach worker for those with HIV, she said affordable, GLBT-friendly senior housing is badly needed. She is not related to Michael Adams.

"I would be incomplete if I had to go from wearing stockings and dresses to (work boots) and jeans," Adams says. "I would like to be able to live in a community where I could fully be me." - AP

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Home, sweet home: Mark Segal, director of the Dr Magnus Hirschfeld Fund and publisher of the *Philadelphia Gay News*, at the site of a planned, gay-friendly affordable housing facility in Philadelphia. The group is spearheading the project to have the building constructed. Elder advocates say a lack of gay-friendly affordable housing for seniors is leading many to hide their sexual orientation after years of being open about it.