What Are the Concerns of Aging LGBT People, Including Those With HIV?

A new report finds higher rates of depression and injuries from falls among older LGBT people—plus continued effects from the HIV epidemic.

December 17, 2020 By Trent Straube

Aging LGBT adults in Massachusetts are twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression and twice as likely to fall and injure themselves compared with their straight, cisgender counterparts, according to a report from The Fenway Institute. What's more, those also aging with HIV are concerned about finding specialized health care, and those with HIV younger than 60 want to be able to access home health care.

Those are a few of the takeaways from a series of listening sessions held the past year and published in a report titled "LGBT Aging 2025: Strategies for Achieving a Healthy and Thriving LGBT Older Adult Community in Massachusetts."

The report highlighted several key themes that recurred in the listening sessions. A few examples include:

- Anti-LGBT discrimination in assisted living
- Social isolation and lack of connection
- The need to address racism within the LGBT community
- Economic hardship in general
- HIV-specific concerns
- The need for help navigating the health care system
- The need for social activities that create a sense of community and belonging
- The need for hardware (computers, tablets), internet access and technical assistance to isolated low-income LGBT elders so that they can access virtual support groups and other services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Related data in the report also compare LGBT people ages 50 to 75 with straight and cisgender

people the same age. Samples of the differences between the two groups show that

LGBT elders reported:

- Higher rates of fair/poor overall health
- Four times the rate of suicidal thoughts in the past year
- Three times the rate of lifetime sexual violence victimization.

LGBT elders were also:

- Nearly twice as likely to report ever having been diagnosed with a depressive disorder
- As likely to be a veteran and to have children in the household
- More likely to have four or more years of college education
- More likely to rent and less likely to own their home
- More likely to report difficulty paying for housing or food in the past year
- More likely to report serious difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Nearly twice as likely to fall and be injured in past year.

“These findings are deeply troubling and point to the need for vigorous enforcement of existing state and federal law prohibiting anti-LGBTQ discrimination as well as targeted interventions to reduce social isolation among LGBTQ older adults and meet their unique health care needs,” said report author and director of health policy research at The Fenway Institute Sean Cahill, PhD, in a press release about the report.

State’s older LGBTQ residents experience higher rates of depression, poverty, and injuries due to falls than their straight, cisgender peers https://t.co/Cr4fCKJroO

— Fenway Health (@FenwayHealth) December 14, 2020

“Although a lot of the information in this report focuses on health risks and disparities, we also found that LGBTQ older adults are resilient, in part, because they’ve had dramatically different life experiences than their straight and cisgender peers,” added Cahill

He places this cohort in the context of broader AIDS history: “They came of age when same-sex

behavior or crossing gender boundaries was subject to imprisonment or institutionalization. Homosexuality was against the law in all 50 states into the early 1960s and classified as a mental illness until 1973. Many LGBTQ people were shunned by their families. Many LGBTQ elders lost their life partners and social networks to HIV/AIDS. This is a population that has experienced a lot of trauma and its effects are ongoing. But they are survivors."

The Fenway Institute is the research, policy, education and training arm of Boston-based Fenway Health, which provides health care and other services to the area's LGBT and HIV communities.

Other cities are trying to meet the needs of their aging LGBT populations. For example, read "DC Bill Protects LGBT Seniors and Those With HIV. But There's a Catch." That article also reports on an affordable housing community for LGBT seniors in Florida that sets aside units for folks with HIV.

And in related news, see "Older Lesbian, Gay and Bi Adults Use Substances More Than Straight People," and click the tag #Long-Term Survivors for a collection are articles on this HIV population. Of note is the May 2020 cover story "Stand By Me: for long-term survivors, the key to embracing resilience is sticking together."

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