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Graying gays find helping hands

As population ages, service agencies struggle to address community's social, financial, medical concerns

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Once a week, Luis Oropeza and Jimmy Ho get together and discuss theater, art, social work -- their mutual careers -- and a host of other topics.

Each brings his own experience to the conversation: Oropeza has introduced Ho to Bay Area theater, and Ho shows him aspects of Chinese and Asian culture.

Both men also are gay and enjoy analyzing and sharing their impressions of gay culture. The ease of their lunchtime conversations, often in the Fillmore district near Oropeza's Cathedral Hill apartment, belies their vast difference in age: Oropeza is 63 years old; Ho is 26.

Their weekly meetings are part of one program among several cropping up across the country to address the needs of aging lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people among the first generation to meet wide acceptance when they declared their sexual orientation.

"The increasing interest in LGBT aging across North America undoubtedly is a reflection of the aging of the Baby Boom generation, the oldest members of which are reaching age 60 this year," said Gerard Koskovich, who is a liaison from the American Society on Aging to that organization's Lesbian & Gay Aging Issues Network.

Nationally, as many as 3 million gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are older than 65, according to research from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a gay rights organization. That number could grow to 4 million by 2030. Organizations for older gays and lesbians are forming in New York, California and Florida. Of the 27 LGBT community centers in North America, 13 offer older-adult programs, according to a July article in the Journal on Active Aging.

As gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people age, they face most of the same problems anyone does, but often more acutely. Along with isolation, unsafe housing and financial insecurity, their problems include possible prejudice from doctors and other caregivers, for example.

Some people who have been out for decades have felt compelled to return to the closet, service providers who work with gay and lesbian seniors said. Brian de Vries, a professor of gerontology at San Francisco State University, said his research has shown that at least a third of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender seniors have not disclosed their sexual orientation to their physicians.

Through the city-funded Friendly Visitor program of the San Francisco gay and lesbian mental health and social support organization New Leaf, Ho was paired with Oropeza. Ho's visits are meant to combat Oropeza's isolation, a problem common among the elderly but more so for gay,

lesbian, bisexual and transgender people because many do not have children and live far from or are estranged from their families.

"I'm gay and I have gay friends, but I don't have a gay social life. I long since passed the bar scene," said Oropeza, who is still active in theater productions in San Francisco, though he is sometimes sidelined by his Parkinson's disease. He is single and childless, and he has siblings he sees a few times a year on holidays.

Volunteer Ho also gets a lot from the relationship.

"I feel like he is one of my professors, in a way," said Ho, who is earning his master's degree in counseling at San Francisco State University. "He has a lot to teach me."

San Francisco has about 17,000 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people older than 60, according to the Department of Adult and Aging Services. The population is ready to demand the services it needs.

"This generation includes the LGBT people who came of age with the profound social changes of the 1960s and 1970s," said the American Society on Aging's Koskovich. "They took part in the gay liberation movement when they were young, and they are moving toward old age with expectations that are quite distinct from those of the previous generation of LGBT people, who grew up in an era when discretion was the key to survival."

Today the North Berkeley Senior Center is to become the first Bay Area senior agency to be certified as "LGBT Friendly" by Lavender Seniors of the East Bay. That group, which supports gay and lesbian seniors, estimates they number between 15,000 and 25,000 in Alameda County.

The organization hopes to certify 30 different venues, including nursing homes, this year and 40 next year, eventually compiling them in a directory, said Barbara Faulkner, director of Lavender Seniors of the East Bay. The criteria include having sexual orientation nondiscrimination policies, plus gay or lesbian staffers, sensitivity training for employees, or displays that show acceptance for gays and lesbians.

"So many of our seniors, especially the older ones, have had negative experiences in health care agencies or in community agencies like senior centers," Faulkner said.

These seniors tend to have more health problems as well because they have fewer informal caregivers such as spouses or children and often wait longer than other aging people to see a doctor, said de Vries of San Francisco State. Many have fewer financial resources than senior heterosexuals because when a person in a same-sex couple dies, the surviving partner is not eligible for Social Security survivor benefits or, in most cases, survivor pension benefits.

Many also experience what may be a healthy level of denial. Even as the generation ages, people such as Oropeza resist defining themselves by their age.

"Nobody considers themselves old," he said. "You get older, but you're not old."