

Quad City Times

Grant to improve care for gay seniors

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By David Heitz

A local gay and lesbian advocacy group has received a \$3,000 grant to hire a professional who will enlighten social service and health-care providers for senior citizens about issues specific to an aging gay population.

"There's some prediction that as the baby boomers enter the retirement system, that because they haven't been a fairly aggressive cohort of people, they may be more demanding of appropriate services," said Joyce Wiley, founder of Quad-Citians Affirming Diversity, or QCAD, Rock Island, the recipient of the grant.

The Minneapolis-based Pfund awarded the grant, which was written by Anne Corbi, a QCAD board member.

Corbi said the project likely will cost about \$8,000. "Part of the costs, we will absorb as an agency. It would be an easier project if we had a little more money."

The trainer likely will be someone from the senior services industry who specializes in gay and lesbian issues, she said.

Corbi said the need to educate the elderly services community revealed itself during focus groups held in January with gay senior citizens as well as gay and straight health-care providers.

"I think the seniors were concerned because they did not feel they could trust service providers without being judged. Seniors grew up in a time where they did not feel as affirmed or welcome in the community as young people do today."

Gay seniors generally do not get health-care insurance from a partner the way married couples receive a spouse's benefits, Wiley said.

What's more, a study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force cites that fewer than 1 in 5 live with a partner, and 90 percent have no children, she said, making growing old a potentially lonely proposition for them.

"Their need for services is high, and yet they access services at a far lower rate than straight seniors because they feel uncomfortable. So we need to help these services reach out and let gay and lesbian seniors know they will be provided services, as well as train these service providers how to work with gay and lesbian clients," she said.

Among the things that service providers for gay and lesbian seniors need to learn is to use more inclusive language and "make their offices welcoming so they don't have everything set up as a heterosexual world," Wiley added.

That may mean hanging pictures of same-sex couples, discussing partners and not just spouses, and understanding that a gay or lesbian person may have a very close friend who visits regularly and needs to be treated with the respect of a spouse.

“Health-care providers also need to understand that, with gay and lesbian seniors, they’re dealing with a population that has a much higher rate of stress in their lives,” Wiley said. “Stress-related diseases are higher and need to be evaluated accordingly. If health-care providers do not realize this, then they are not providing optimal care.”

Clayton Peterson, the facilitator of QCAD’s Gay and Gray group, said senior health-care and social-services providers need to “understand our 30-year relationships, the friends who are closer to family. Maybe it’s part of the baby boomers leading the way and making a difference for those who are in their 20s or 30s now who won’t have to face these issues when they’re 50 or 60.

“The world is changing on a daily basis, and we just want to be part of that change.”