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Veterans Joint Budget Hearings on 2016-2017 Executive Budget Proposal

February 9, 2016

Budgets and Programs for Veterans-State's efforts to connect veterans with services and benefits.

On behalf of SAGE, Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders, I would like to thank you for holding this budget hearing. My name is Thomas Weber, and I am the Director of Care Management at SAGE, and with me is Latina Vega, the Program Coordinator of our SAGEVets program. SAGE, which began in New York City nearly 40 years ago, is the country's oldest and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults and has provided comprehensive social service and community-building programs, including the nation's first full-time LGBT Senior Center located in New York City, which has since expanded to include Senior Centers across the five boroughs. SAGE is also a national affiliate organization, and there are currently four SAGE programs across New York State: in Rochester, Kingston, Syracuse and Long Island.

New York is home to approximately one million men and women who served their country in the Armed Forces. It is estimated that 37,757 gay and lesbian veterans live in NYS, and 17,000 live in NYC alone.ⁱ When ranked by the number and per capita rate of gay and lesbian veterans, NYS and NYC are among the top ten. A recent statewide needs assessment on LGBT Veterans, commissioned by the New York State Department of Health, revealed that 74% of LGBT veterans live in upstate New York and that 56% of LGBT New Yorkers who identified as veterans were over the age of 50.ⁱⁱ In response to these growing numbers, SAGE, with assistance from the New York State Assembly and the Veterans Affairs Committee, created the SAGEVets program to identify, support and provide access to care to LGBT older veterans across the state.

Across New York State, more than 720,000 veterans are not receiving their health care benefits from the VA.ⁱⁱⁱ This is partly because the Federal bureaucracy fails to reach out and let our vets know what services they are entitled to and partly because navigating the complex benefits system offered by the VA can be difficult for anyone. For LGBT vets, especially those who are currently over the age of 60, however, there are additional barriers and challenges – both to healthcare access within the VA system as well as to services to meet the needs created by the fact of military service at a time when discrimination against LGBT people was rampant and a matter of official government policy.

Discrimination is at the root of many of the problems specific to LGBT veterans. Service members who were forced to conceal their sexual orientation experienced and continue to experience negative mental health effects related to discrimination, as numerous studies have

demonstrated. Despite these consequences, few resources are available for traumatized LGBT veterans.^{iv} Further, VA research shows that the strain from being stigmatized and the target of bigoted hostility can produce higher rates of smoking, alcohol and drug abuse in LGBT vets, as well as a greater risk of anxiety and depression.^v Recent research indicates that only one-third of LGBT veterans openly communicate about their sexual orientation with VA healthcare providers, and one-quarter avoided seeking specific services because of perceived stigma. Transgender veterans, who represent a startlingly high 30% of LGBT veterans, are especially reluctant to seek healthcare, and many report negative experiences with healthcare institutions. 24% of transgender veterans report being refused medical treatment for being transgender, and 43% say they have postponed or neglected to seek medical care when they were sick for fear of discrimination or maltreatment.^{vi}

As a result of these discriminatory circumstances, many LGBT elder veterans have not accessed their federal VA and related benefits. Instead, many rely on state public assistance programs, shifting what should be a Federal expense to New York State. Other LGBT elder veterans go without essential income, medical and other support services, leading to impoverishment, over-reliance on emergency room visits and hospitalization for medical care, and homelessness.

In recognition of these challenges, and leveraging our decades of experience working with marginalized LGBT elders, SAGEVets provides New York's LGBT elder veterans with case management support, benefits advocacy, access to legal counsel through a partnership with Legal Services for New York and enhanced wrap-around services in order to improve their overall well-being. Our SAGEVets Coordinator, herself an LGBT Veteran understands innately the challenges LGBT older adults face when they don't know where to turn, and that working within a bureaucratic structure such as the VA system requires an understanding and a fortitude that most cannot approach without support.

In the past year and a half since SAGEVets was launched, we have traveled across the State, providing veterans groups with information about the unique challenges of the LGBT Veterans whom they may or may not know they are working with we have provided case management, referral and entitlement counseling to assist veterans in accessing their full degree of service-related assistance; and we have begun to create communities of support for LGBT older veterans, including starting an LGBT Older Veterans Support Group at our SAGE Center in Midtown Manhattan, and marching under the SAGEVets banner in last year's Veterans Day Parade in New York City. SAGE recognizes that there are two fundamental approaches to ensuring LGBT Veterans are served: one is through direct service, and the other through public education and outreach. Given the scope of the service landscape in New York State, providing such critical information to the Veterans Network would allow LGBT veterans, wherever they access care to receive welcome and competent treatment.

SAGE respectfully requests \$200,000 in State Fiscal Year 2016-2017 to expand our program. This increased support would allow SAGE to expand SAGEVets by launching a veterans program at our SAGE affiliate in Rochester and hire a SAGEVets Coordinator to concentrate on the large numbers of our LGBT veterans who call upstate New York home. Additional support would also allow SAGE to create a stipendiary Peer Outreach Program to reach more LGBT older veterans, focusing on marginalized communities (e.g transgender veterans and veterans of

color). We hope that the New York State Assembly and the Veterans Affairs Committee will continue to provide support through resources for the direct case management and education that support the LGBT older adults – including our veterans – across New York who face severe challenges with income security and other basic quality of life issues as they age. Your support continues to be greatly valued and appreciated.

Thank you for your time and attention.

ⁱ http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411069_GayLesbianMilitary.pdf

ⁱⁱ Frazer, M.S., Ball, A. & Howe, E. (2016). *The Health of LGBT Veterans in NY State: A report from the 2015 LGBT Health and Human Service Needs Assessment*. New York, NY and Albany, NY: AIDS Institute, LGBT Health and Human Services Network & Strength in Numbers Consulting Group. PowerPoint Presentation

ⁱⁱⁱ Gillibrand Report for Pro-Vets Legislation. <http://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ProVets%20Report.pdf>

^{iv} See Moradi 2009 for a review: Bonnie Moradi. 2009. "Sexual Orientation Disclosure, Concealment, Harassment, and Military Cohesion: Perceptions of LGBT Military Veterans." *Military Psychology* 21 (4): 513-533.

^v <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/New-era-for-gay-veterans-as-milit...>

^{vi} Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. 2011. "Injustice At Every Turn: A Report Of The National Transgender Discrimination Survey." Washington, D.C.: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.