

Strengthening Health and Aging Services for LGBTQ+ Older Adults in Rhode Island

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INTRODUCTION

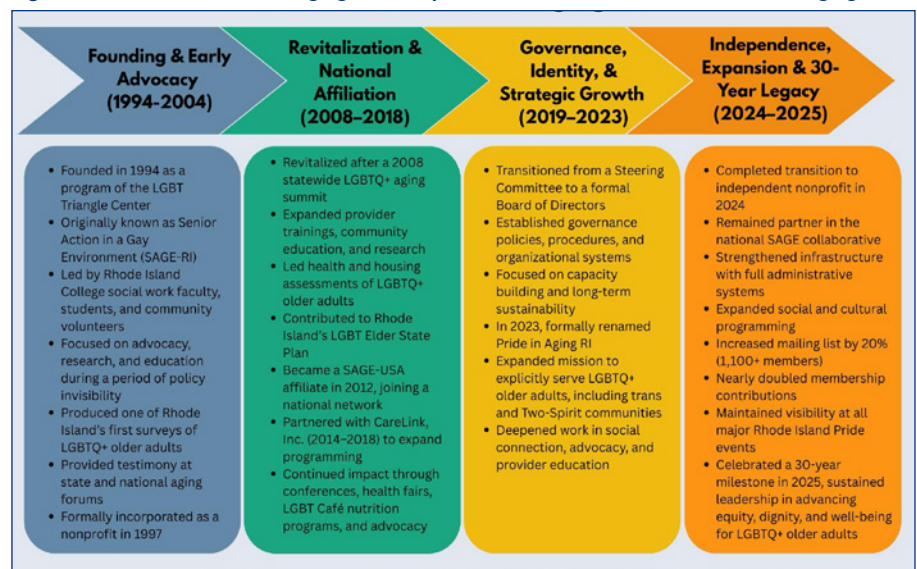
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) older adults represent one of the fastest-growing aging communities in the United States, with an estimated three million adults aged 65 and older identifying as LGBTQ+, a number expected to double by 2060.¹ Despite this growth, LGBTQ+ older adults experience distinct health and aging inequities shaped by lifelong exposure to stigma, discrimination, and systemic exclusion, differentiating them both from younger LGBTQ+ adults and heterosexual, cisgender peers.¹⁻³ These experiences are associated with higher rates of chronic illness, mental health concerns, social isolation, and avoidance of healthcare and senior services, with invisibility often functioning as an adaptive response to non-affirming environments.⁴⁻⁶

In Rhode Island, community-level data indicate that LGBTQ+ older adults face limited access to identity-affirming aging and healthcare services, with few senior centers or providers offering targeted or inclusive programming, contributing to unmet needs and increased risk of hospitalization and premature institutionalization.⁷⁻⁹ Community-based research and practice initiatives led by Pride in Aging Rhode Island (PIARI) have documented these gaps while generating community-informed expertise that can be translated into practical guidance for healthcare and aging service professionals.¹⁰ This underscores the critical role of nonprofit organizations in reducing isolation, building provider capacity, and advancing culturally responsive, person-centered care for LGBTQ+ older adults within Rhode Island's healthcare systems. Given these persistent disparities and gaps in identity-affirming services, there is a need to examine strategies for improving health, social support, and services for LGBTQ+ older adults in Rhode Island.

Since 1994, PIARI (formerly SAGE-RI) has worked to ensure that LGBTQ+ older adults in Rhode Island are seen, supported, and empowered. Through social programming, community partnerships, and statewide education efforts,

the organization works to ensure that LGBTQ+ older adults have access to affirming services, supportive environments, and opportunities to participate fully in decisions that affect their lives. PIARI has served as a leading voice for LGBTQ+ older adults. Rooted in research and community engagement, the organization has collaborated with agencies such as the Rhode Island Foundation, the Office of Healthy Aging, Carelink, and numerous academic, nonprofit, and healthcare partners to provide social programs that reduce isolation, deliver high-quality, cultural competence training to healthcare and aging professionals, and ensure LGBTQ+ older adults can access safe, affirming services. Over the past 30 years, PIARI has grown from a small volunteer effort into a statewide leader supporting LGBTQ+ older adults. Today, PIARI continues this legacy through intergenerational programs, community cafés, educational initiatives, and advocacy that promotes equitable access to culturally responsive care. Drawing on 30 years of LGBTQ+ older adult advocacy in Rhode Island [Figure 1]—and emerging LGBTQ+ older adult health research—this commentary weaves together PIARI Board's collective wisdom to highlight actionable, community-informed strategies for strengthening aging services, supports, and systems to advance health, well-being, and inclusion statewide.

Figure 1. 30 Years of LGBTQ+ Aging Advocacy in Rhode Island: A Timeline of Pride in Aging RI



PATHWAYS TO STRENGTHEN LGBTQ+ OLDER ADULT HEALTH IN RHODE ISLAND

Advancing Visibility Through LGBTQ+-Affirming Aging Environments

Many older adults served through PIARI lack children or family members to advocate for them, and may be less positioned to self-advocate within healthcare, housing, and long-term care systems that continue to presume heterosexuality and cisgender identity. As LGBTQ+ older adults age, social networks often contract due to illness, loss, or mobility limitations, making intentional community connection increasingly vital.^{11,12} PIARI's work reinforces that effective support must be *relational* rather than solely programmatic, rooted in trust, visibility, and belonging for LGBTQ+ older adults. In Rhode Island, the limited number of LGBTQ+-affirming programs and services makes this relational approach essential to prevent social isolation and ensure LGBTQ+ older adults feel recognized and supported statewide. There is a critical need for LGBTQ+-affirming senior centers, adult day programs, assisted living settings, and dementia-capable services across the state. Implementation of LGBTQ+-affirming environments within such services can help close existing service gaps, and even create a model for other states seeking to improve LGBTQ+ aging equity.¹³

Addressing Ageism and Advocacy Fatigue Through Intergenerational Solidarity

There is a pervasiveness of ageism both in broader society and within LGBTQ+ communities themselves, resulting in a widening generational divide, as the lived experiences of older LGBTQ+ adults (shaped by eras of criminalization, concealment, and survival) often differ sharply from those of younger LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ This disconnect can lead to diminished interest and investment in LGBTQ+ older adult issues, leaving LGBTQ+ older adults feeling marginalized even within spaces meant to serve them.¹⁷ Persistent ageism, combined with limited capacity, energy, and people power, can make sustained advocacy feel like a losing battle. Strengthening intergenerational connections in Rhode Island's LGBTQ+ community is critical to build resiliency among LGBTQ+ older adults while energizing younger advocates, creating sustainable local networks that support both social inclusion and advocacy. Intergenerational engagement strategies that honor LGBTQ+ older adult leadership, preserve community memory, and renew shared responsibility for LGBTQ+ aging equity is a critical priority for LGBTQ+ older adult health care.¹⁸ Rhode Island's smaller population and concentrated services mean that such community cohesion can directly influence older adults' access to affirming care and social support.

Building Intersectional and Cross-Sector Approaches to LGBTQ+ Aging Equity

There is no single LGBTQ+ aging experience; rather, later life is shaped by intersecting identities related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, immigration history, socioeconomic status, and HIV status, alongside cumulative exposure to stigma across the life course.¹⁹⁻²¹ PIARI has witnessed how policy and systems-level gains—such as explicit protections for same-sex partners in long-term care, inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity data in assessments and state planning, and mandated cultural competency training—have meaningfully increased visibility and safety, even as these gains remain inconsistent and politically vulnerable.

Moreover, recent federal political actions in the United States have directly targeted members PIARI serves, including transgender, gender non-conforming, and immigrant LGBTQ+ older adults—severely impacting their sense of safety, access to care, and overall health.²²⁻²⁴ Cross-sector collaborative efforts are urgently needed during this time to help ensure that LGBTQ+ older adults feel safe in Rhode Island. There remains a critical need for wider networking and stronger partnerships among aging services, healthcare systems, housing providers, behavioral health organizations, assisted-living and nursing home facilities, and LGBTQ+ community organizations to ensure affirming and sustainable support for LGBTQ+ older adults throughout the state, particularly those who are the most targeted by violent federal policies.

CONCLUSION

Three strategies have been identified as key pathways to strengthen the LGBTQ+ aging community: increasing visibility through LGBTQ+-affirming environments, fostering intergenerational solidarity and advocacy, and building cross-sector approaches to LGBTQ+ equity. The Rhode Island medical community is uniquely positioned to champion these strategies through both individual and collaborative action. Deepening visibility and awareness of LGBTQ+ older adults, cultivating an ethos of welcome and belonging in care, and advancing affirming healthcare environments are vital to supporting LGBTQ+ older adults.^{25,26} More robust state-level data on LGBTQ+ older adults in Rhode Island is also critically needed to inform coordinated service response and respond to the needs of the community—especially amid heightened political and social challenges.

Since its founding in 1994, PIARI has evolved to meet the changing needs, strengths, and resilience of LGBTQ+ older adults. Rhode Island's close-knit communities provide a strong foundation for building intergenerational opportunities and networks that celebrate and honor the experiences of LGBTQ+ older adults while energizing the next

generation. Fostering intergenerational engagement in programming also offers a promising strategy to combat ageism, as multigenerational knowledge-sharing and chosen families remain central to LGBTQ+ aging, especially among transgender, Black, Indigenous, and other BIPOC same-gender-loving communities.^{27,28}

In the nation's smallest state, Rhode Island's medical community—working alongside PIARI—is strategically positioned to lead LGBTQ+ older adult health equity by leveraging its more centralized, coordinated health systems to address disparities across both rural and urban communities. This proximity also makes it more feasible to build and sustain cross-sector partnerships across aging services, healthcare, housing, and policy systems, supporting relationship-based action. At the policy level, advancing LGBTQ+ aging equity in Rhode Island requires aligning statewide strategies, particularly with organizations such as the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging, Rhode Island Department of Health, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, and Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals to support inclusive, coordinated, and sustainable approaches. By continuing to build visibility, foster intergenerational connections, and strengthen cross-sector collaborations, Rhode Island can create a sustainable, inclusive aging ecosystem that meets the evolving needs of LGBTQ+ Rhode Islanders, and serve as a model for other states, now and into the future.

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