

Are we there yet? Key collaborations on the pathway to quality services for GLBT seniors in Victoria

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ABSTRACT

Issues:

Navigating the pathway to quality services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) seniors and carers can be a challenge. Uncertainty about attitudes and fear of the consequences of disclosure of sexual identity can mean reluctance to access services. The potential for discrimination, intentional or not, is exacerbated by mixed messages about acceptance of same sex relationships and concern about the understanding of specific needs by aged care service providers.

Discussion:

Based on analysis of initial research and community consultations, The ALSO Foundation (ALSO) has developed *About Time! GLBT Seniors ALSO Matter*; a strategic plan providing direction for ALSO in its own advocacy and programs, and in its relationships with other mainstream community services.

About Time! related action includes establishment of an advisory committee composed of representatives from services relating to seniors, and collaboration with organisations including COTA Victoria, Carers Victoria, Seniors Information Victoria, Vintage Men and Matrix Guild.

Achievements include a joint publication of the Rainbow Seniors information service brochure and training for staff who answer information requests; *Over the Rainbow*, a GLBT seniors physical activity program; an annual Seniors Festival Rainbow Seniors Tea Dance; and development of support for GLBT carers.

Conclusions:

This paper considers the road travelled by ALSO to develop strategic partnerships with mainstream and GLBT specific organizations. The ALSO seniors project demonstrates practical advances towards the time and place where GLBT seniors and carers can confidently anticipate and receive quality, informed services that meet their specific needs. Are we there yet? Not yet – but we are on the way.

¹ The views expressed in this paper are personal and do not represent the views of either The ALSO Foundation or my employer, the Office of Senior Victorians.

Introduction

Navigating the pathway to quality services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) seniors and carers can be a challenge. Uncertainty about attitudes and fear of the consequences of disclosure of sexual identity can mean reluctance to access services.

The potential for discrimination, intentional or not, is exacerbated by mixed messages about acceptance of same sex relationships and concern about the understanding of specific needs by aged care service providers.

One of the most important community development objectives of The ALSO Foundation (ALSO) in Victoria is to meet the needs of GLBT people as they age. ALSO is in the prime position to facilitate and enable the provision of best-practice services to GLBT people.²

The ALSO Foundation

In the early 1980s, ALSO began as the Alternative Lifestyle Organisation Foundation when gay men and lesbians joined together to organise the celebration of (male) homosexual decriminalisation reforms in Victoria. ALSO carries out fundraising activities to help fund its work and the ALSO Care and Benevolent Society Inc. is a registered charity. We receive some of our income from the All So Fabulous Opportunity Shop.

With several full and part-time staff, limited term project staff and volunteers who provide assistance within the office and with specific projects, ALSO remains Victoria's largest not-for-profit gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) community organisation. Our current activities include community development projects such as the ALSO Seniors Project and our recently opened Alsorts Youth Housing Service, an occasional grants program for community projects, support for Minus18 Youth Group and the AIDS Trust of Australia, publication of an annual community directory and a range of social activities.

In the beginning

Based on concerns expressed by a number of ALSO members, we developed an initial needs research and analysis project. This was conducted using volunteer researchers with the results analysed by researchers from RMIT University. This revealed that many gay, lesbian and transgender seniors experience loneliness, isolation and considerable difficulties in accessing appropriate health care services, particularly older gay men. Experiences of actual service provision varied based on the ability of individuals to negotiate appropriate and sensitive care.

The Needs of Older Gay, Lesbian and Transgender People was published in late 2002.

Where are we going?

Our next action was to hold supplementary community forums in mid 2003. These were conducted by volunteers and based on discussion of the initial research findings. These consultations focused on including current and future needs of ageing lesbians and gay men; types of services/ programs/ activities that could meet these needs and possible roles for ALSO, seniors themselves and other organisations in responding to these needs.

Using the needs analysis, contributions by forum participants and observations of the Boston LGBT Aging Project in the USA, ALSO developed About Time! GLBT Seniors ALSO Matter Strategic Plan containing 32 "action opportunities".

² www.also.org.au/discover/projectsandservices/abouttime.htm - ALSO Foundation website accessed 20 November 2006

What is ALSO doing?

At the public launch of About Time! we invited participant to become part of an advisory or reference group to work on implementation of the “action opportunities”. The ALSO Seniors Project Advisory Committee, known as ASPAC, was formed in mid 2004. The initial focus of the ALSO seniors project has primarily been on gay and lesbian seniors. At this stage, we do not have representatives of bisexual or transgender ageing interests as ASPAC members. However some of our activities have included participation by transgender seniors.

As well as hosting and chairing ASPAC, ALSO has taken action based on a number of the recommendations in About Time.

These include:

- ALSO Directory Older Persons Services and Support information page
- Collaboration with key mainstream groups.
- Collaboration with gay and lesbian seniors groups
- Occasional forums – covering Enduring Powers of Attorney and Wills, superannuation, sex, carers’ issues.
- Funded activities - Rainbow Seniors health promotion project (activities and recreation)
- Annual Rainbow Seniors Tea Dance.

ASPAC members

Current members come from a range of backgrounds and bring connections with mainstream and GLBT services providers and community organisations. As well as providing an opportunity for ALSO to seek input to its work, ASPAC enables participants to develop collaborative relationships outside the committee.

Here are some examples of collaboration between ALSO and key players to achieve positive outcomes for GLBT seniors in Victoria.

Fellow travellers – COTA Victoria

The Council on the Ageing Victoria (COTA) is the peak body representing the wide-ranging needs and interests of older people in the Victorian community. Its mission is to mobilise older people and those who work with them, to age well in a just society.³

Through a partnership developed following participation with ASPAC, ALSO and the state government funded COTA auspiced hotline and shop front information service, Seniors Information Victoria (SIV), have published the Rainbow Seniors brochure in late 2005.

To enable staff to provide informed and sensitive services to callers ALSO, in collaboration with Matrix Guild, Vintage Men and the Equal Opportunity Commission, conducted a sexuality awareness and information session for COTA and SIV staff in mid 2005.

COTA has taken its own action and has included GLBT seniors in their series of *Have Your Say* community consultations and has hosted an information session for local government representatives as part of its Positive Ageing project jointly auspiced by the Municipal Association of Victoria.

³ www.cotavic.org.au - COTA Website accessed 20 November 2006

Fellow travellers – Carers Victoria

Carers Victoria is the peak body representing and supporting carers in Victoria. Their services include provision of advice, resources and referral; emotional support and counselling and education and training workshops.

Through association with ASPAC, Carers Victoria agreed to collaborate with ALSO to examine their own programs with a view to providing services that support GLBT carers. Carers Victoria have worked with ALSO to develop a Rainbow Carers brochure and participated in a forum held during Carers Week 2006.

Staff training with Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria is being arranged and further discussions will be held about options for future collaboration including an on-line carer support group.

In addition to work with Carers Victoria, we have also held an initial meeting with Alzheimer's Australia Victoria to discuss carer support issues.

Fellow travellers – Matrix Guild and Vintage Men

Matrix Guild and Vintage Men have been part of ASPAC since its beginning. Matrix Guild is committed to the establishment of appropriate care and accommodation and support of alternative lifestyle options for lesbians over 40. Vintage Men is a social support group for mature gay and bisexual men and their friends. Vintage Men also has an active pastoral support component.

Both organisations have supported ALSO in organising the annual Rainbow Seniors Tea Dance as part of the Victorian Seniors Festival in 2004, 2005 and 2006. They are also part of the Seniors Summer Fun reference group.

Fellow travellers – Go for your life

Seniors Summer Fun is the key outcome of State Government Go for your life funding received by ALSO. The project aims to promote and conduct a series of physical activity opportunities across metropolitan Melbourne that are innovative and appealing to GLBT seniors.

This ALSO program was launched in October 2006 and includes lawn bowling, ballroom dancing, neighbourhood walks, Pilates and aqua-aerobics activities. This program has brought on board more collaborators including two local councils and Dance Cats, who teach a range of Ballroom and other dance styles from beginners to advanced levels.

Other collaborators - Victorian Seniors Festival

We have been fortunate to secure State Government funding to support our Rainbow Tea Dance over the past three years.

This association with the Festival also brings a wonderful opportunity to provide information to the broader community. Listings of our dance and the now annual Matrix Guild picnic are in the Festival program, which is distributed through Coles and Bi Lo Supermarkets as well as local libraries and other community venues, enabling information about key contacts for GLBT seniors to reach people across Victoria.

Other collaborators – Ministerial Advisory Bodies

The ALSO Foundation has developed a partnership with the Ministerial Advisory Council of Senior Victorians to present a community forum on Enduring Powers of Attorney, a matter of critical interest to GLBT seniors when considering issues that could arise should a person no longer have the capacity to make their own decisions.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health initiated a Department of Human Services (DHS) roundtable discussion on ageing issues affecting GLBTI Victorians and the Department's policy and program response. Both ALSO and COTA provided presentations to senior DHS staff at this round table.

Other collaborators - Mainstream seniors media

Reaching GLBT seniors in the wider community is a real concern. We are very aware that some seniors in outer urban and rural communities have no access to any programs or even publications that support their identity or provide opportunities to socialise in a "safe" environment.

In addition to the messages provided through the Victorian Seniors Festival program booklet, we are pleased to receive support from the two key seniors printed media publications - Victorian Senior and Fifty Plus News. Like the Festival program, these free publications are distributed across the state in a range of outlets, including local pharmacies.

Similar journeys

ALSO is aware that we are not the only ones who have embarked on this journey towards positive ageing for GLBT seniors. In early 2006, we hosted a meeting in Melbourne which brought together individuals from tertiary education, community organisation and service provider perspectives to discuss our interest and work relating to GLBT ageing and future opportunities for collaboration and networking. The meeting included a presentation from Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria on early findings from the Private Lives Survey.

Meeting face to face gave us the chance to develop our connections already forged through email and website communications and to learn about work that others are involved with. In recent years the AAG conferences have included one (or no) papers on GLBT related ageing. At our Melbourne meeting, we agreed to take action to make sure that the 2006 conference with its theme of *Diversity in Ageing*, would have many papers on this subject. This conference has also provided us with the opportunity to meet again.

Are we there yet?

Two years ago, I spoke at the AAG Conference in Melbourne about our plans to explore opportunities for collaboration with other agencies and to encourage links across the GLBT community and with our mainstream colleagues. I talked of our vision of developing models of care and support that address the issues identified by the participants in our original research and consultations that would enable service providers to provide services that are sensitive to the needs of GLBT seniors.

As a small volunteer based organisation, ALSO has limits on how much it can achieve on its own. This presentation has highlighted the advances achieved through collaboration with key mainstream and GLBT organizations since 2004.

The ALSO Seniors Project demonstrates practical advances towards the inclusion of GLBT seniors under the broader mainstream umbrella of diversity. We look forward to a society where programs are provided with an understanding of our experiences and needs and offer choices and quality services for all.

Are we there yet? No – but we are on the way!