

As we emerge from a tragic pandemic, let's catalyze action among professionals in the fields that shape the physical housing and communities where we live. This series of case studies shares innovations that are advancing a set of **guiding principles** for built environment professionals—from creative ways to redress inequities and engage the public in participatory planning, to unique housing and community models that enable every resident to thrive.



Photos: Tonic

LGBTQ+/SGL* -Affirming Housing for Older People

By **Stephanie Firestone** and **Julia Glassman**

Many older LGBTQ+/SGL people who pioneered coming out of the closet are now forced to go back in. As their housing needs and preferences change with age, prejudice is still rampant. And under the U.S. Fair Housing Act, gender identity and sexual orientation are not explicitly protected classes where housing is concerned. Creating appropriate housing for LGBTQ+/SGL seniors must be informed by the life experiences of older people in this community, which often include family rejection, mistreatment, and even violence. This means increasing our cultural competence—from the terminology used, to the design and management of housing developments that consider past traumas. This case study presents innovative housing projects as well as guidance for developers on how to meet some of the unique needs of this particular population.

* SGL—"Same Gender Loving" is a term often used in the older Black community.

Needs/Challenges

Many older adults who identify as LGBTQ+/SGL today experienced myriad traumas during their younger years. In 1953, U.S. President Eisenhower issued an executive order that included “**sexual perversion**” among the list of suspect behaviors with respect to national security considerations for federal employment—alongside criminal activity. LGBTQ+/SGL people were considered mentally ill and often arrested for “degeneracy,” and medicalized violence such as conversion therapy continues in some places to this day. In the United Kingdom, homosexuality was a crime in England until the late 1960s, and laws decriminalizing private consensual homosexual acts were not changed in Scotland or Northern Ireland until the early 1980s.

The accumulated stigma, discrimination, estrangement, and violence remains a part of many lives and often impacts physical and mental health. LGBTQ+/SGL people also suffer **higher rates of poverty** than cisgender heterosexual people. And because LGBTQ+/SGL older adults were often rejected by their families of origin, they are also far less likely to have children (as well as spouses) to help provide for their needs as they age.

Although the housing affordability crisis impacts households of all backgrounds and demographics, older LGBTQ+/SGL people are statistically more likely to face housing discrimination and harassment. For example, homeless shelters, which provide an entry point to affordable housing, are often unsafe, especially for trans elders. The fear they experience is very real, even today. Forty-eight percent of LGBTQ+/SGL couples experience **adverse treatment when seeking senior housing**, and this is even higher for trans people. In a survey of 284 LGBTQ+/SGL older adults living in long-term care facilities, 43 percent reported **mistreatment by residents or staff** related to sexual orientation or gender identity. And in a national survey of LGBTQ+/SGL adults ages 45 and older, 70 percent were concerned they will **need to hide their identity in long-term care**.

In addition to anti-LGBTQ+/SGL bias, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) often deal with racism, which has been prevalent in housing policy, criminalization, employment discrimination, and other historical injustices that have led to disparities in health, wealth, and wellness. A U.S. **study** on the intersection of race and ethnicity on quality of life among LGBTQ+/SGL older adults found lower identity affirmation and social support to be among factors associated with African Americans and Hispanic LGBTQ+/SGL adults 50 and older having decreased physical and psychosocial health-related quality of life, as compared with non-Hispanic White LGBTQ+/SGL older adults. Dr. Imani Woody, a winner of the **2023 AARP Purpose Prize**, says Black people in the community often ask, “Which oppression do I need to care for today—LGBTQ+/SGL, female, Black, differently-abled?”

Innovations

One of the most important innovations in this space is to thoughtfully affirm LGBTQ+/SGL older adults for who they are—to create spaces that are not only safe, but where people’s lives, history, and culture are celebrated. This starts with our terminology, as illustrated by experts cited in this case study. For example, many older people have negative associations with the word “queer,” which they were branded during their earlier lives in a derogatory way. Additionally, in the 1980s the terms “lesbian” and “gay” did not resonate with some Black people, who came to prefer “Same Gender Loving” people, which signifies to older Black members of the community that they are seen. For the sake of consistency, this case study uses the more inclusive “LGBTQ+/SGL” acronym throughout.

Guidance for Developers

In 2015, **SAGE** Advocacy and Services for LGBTQ+/SGL Elders, the world’s oldest and largest organization dedicated to LGBTQ+/SGL older people, launched the **National Housing Initiative** (NHI) to address the systemic barriers and dearth of options available to LGBTQ+/SGL elders seeking safe and affirming housing. This often involves the nexus of poverty, mental health, and housing instability. Among its activities, the initiative promotes design practices that address a history of oppression in physical spaces and more holistically consider the health of LGBTQ+/SGL older adults.

As a targeted public resource, SAGE created the **Housing Development Toolkit: Strategies for Housing Developers and Nonprofits/CBOs in Developing LGBTQ-Affirming Affordable Elder Housing**.

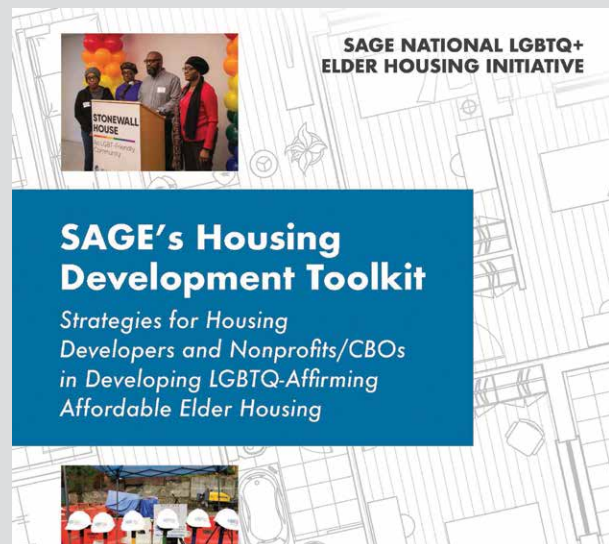


Photo: SAGE

The toolkit’s nine modules provide a comprehensive roadmap through the entire development process:

1. Solid strategies to nurture relationships and generate buy-in and support from community and political leaders, such as creating a power map to identify key stakeholders.
2. Reaching the people who are underserved and can benefit most from this housing, including identifying who you may be missing, with equity in mind.
3. Creating intentional community that is not exclusive, including explicit marketing that this is an oppression-free space, using relevant visual representations, and training marketing staff to use language that denotes LGBTQ+/SGL competency without breaching fair housing regulations (more on this below).
4. Framing the needs using data on the disproportionate rates of poverty, housing, economic instability, and other disparities faced by LGBTQ+/SGL older people, including dispelling the myth that this is a homogeneous group that is predominantly white, cisgender, and middle-upper class.
5. Vetting partners (e.g., developer, property manager, service provision teams) and building relationships with mission-aligned groups.
6. Clearly understanding the capacities of and defining roles for each partner, including expectations regarding tenant support.



82% of survey respondents noted the importance of displaying LGBTQ+/SGL-welcoming signs or symbols in facilities and online.

Why “LGBT-Welcoming” will Soon be a Hallmark of the Most Successful Senior Living Communities. (2019, June 28). Sodexo USA. Retrieved November 9, 2022, from <https://assets2.hrc.org/thelei/documents/LGBTQSeniorsSodexoWhitePaper.pdf>

7. Incorporating appropriate building design, physical infrastructure, and safety considerations (more on design below).
8. Providing cultural competency to cultivate safer community spaces, including empowering LGBTQ+/SGL people by mirroring the language they use for themselves and establishing community agreements.
9. Consistently communicating with community members, demonstrating a commitment to the local community, addressing issues of turf and competition, and preparing to problem-solve around challenges that emerge. Affordable housing can be politicized due to scarcity, particularly in gentrifying areas where communities of color were displaced.

Trauma-Informed Design

Creating a sense of safety among residents is a top priority. Physical environments should **avoid retraumatizing** individuals; done well, a healing environment can even lead to empowerment.

Designs for Dignity, a Chicago-based nonprofit that provides pro bono design services to address systemic inequities, promotes design as a transformational force in human life and believes every individual should have access to environments that support the “wellness of the human spirit.” Some of the recommendations Designs for Dignity includes in their design justice checklist are:

- **Spatial layout:** Clear sightlines and few barriers create a sense of safety and calmness.
- **Avoid overcrowding:** An appropriate quantity of objects, symmetry, and regularity in their arrangement alleviate stress and promote wellbeing.

- **Colors:** Cool colors have a calming effect, while deeply hued warm colors may arouse negative emotions.
- **Lighting:** Natural light makes rooms appear less crowded, and lower levels of illumination mitigate perceived crowding and resulting discomfort.
- **Décor:** Chairs should be higher, wider, and have arms, and sofas should not sink, and furniture arrangements should promote a positive relationship with staff and other occupants. Plants connect people to the natural world, which can reduce stress and pain and improve mood. Art should reflect the particular LGBTQ+/SGL community’s aesthetic.

They also address many elements of **enabling design**, such as incorporating features that account for fine motor, physical, and cognitive health needs, including emergency pulls, shower bars/seats, preventing water spillage that may cause fall risks, space for caregivers, and more.

Affirmation vs. Accreditation

While targeted LGBTQ+/SGL-affirming housing developments may be the gold standard, their creation is severely limited by funding, policy, and other barriers, including the time it takes to build housing at any scale. Therefore, some advocacy groups are focused on accrediting mainstream facilities to become LGBTQ+/SGL-friendly spaces. With gaps in general care for LGBTQ+/SGL people mostly around awareness, accreditation certifies that staff have undergone necessary training.

According to **Building Safe Choices 2020**, a London-based community-led research initiative, 26 percent of respondents said they would go into a general housing with care scheme if it had accreditation, versus only one percent who would go into such a scheme without it. In the UK, the **Pride in Care quality standard** demonstrates an organization’s commitment to delivering high-quality inclusive, safe, and supportive services to older LGBTQ+/SGL people. SAGECare, SAGE’s cultural competency education program, provides credentialization, consulting, and training on LGBTQ+/SGL issues for service providers and elder facilities. The program awards entities a Bronze, Silver, or Gold credentialization status that they can use in their marketing and outreach materials.



Photo: Opening Doors - Pride in Care

Inclusivity in Long-Term Care Settings

Absent basic anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+/SGL people in many states across the U.S., long-term care communities must adopt their own non-discrimination policies to protect their residents and employees. Research by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation and SAGE found that only 18 percent of long-term care communities had an LGBTQ+/SGL-inclusive non-discrimination policy for residents and 36 percent for employees (where enumerated non-discrimination policies even existed).

In 2021, HRC Foundation and SAGE released the first edition of the **Long-Term Care Equality Index (LEI)**, a first-of-its-kind national benchmarking tool that evaluates long-term care communities based on the equity and inclusion of their LGBTQ+/SGL residents and patients. This policy tool and a variety of additional SAGE **resources aim to help organizations develop their cultural competency**, or their capacity to appropriately address the unique needs of the LGBTQ+/SGL older population given their life experiences of discrimination and harassment.



Photo: The Long-Term Care Equality Index (LEI)

LGBTQ+/SGL Housing Models

A variety of specialized housing models have emerged to provide safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ+/SGL older adults to live. This list is not exhaustive but illustrates some innovations in this area.

SAGE

Stonewall House in Fort Green, Brooklyn, is New York State’s first LGBTQ+/SGL-friendly affordable housing for older people and the largest such development in the U.S. It opened at the end of 2019, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, when LGBTQ+/SGL pioneers fought for the right to be out. It addresses the paradox that many of these same LGBTQ+/SGL pioneers were being compelled to go back into the closet to qualify for services or benefits.

Stonewall House is an example of senior housing developers partnering with LGBTQ+/SGL nonprofit service providers to provide inclusive affordable housing opportunities for LGBTQ+/SGL elders. The 17-story building was the result of a partnership among the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), BFC Partners, SAGE, the New York City Housing Development Corporation (HDC), and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). It targets households that earn 50 percent or less of the Area Median Income (AMI) and include at least one person who is 62-years-of-age or older. Among 145 one-bedroom and studio units, 25 percent are designated for formerly homeless households. SAGE also operates a 7,000 square-foot onsite community/senior center on the ground floor for both residents and the larger community.



Photo: SAGE



Photo: Daily Beast

MARY'S HOUSE

Mary’s House for Older Adults develops housing and inclusive environments that address affordability and access in the Washington, D.C. area. The Villages at Mary’s House runs a variety of social and educational programming and services, such as cultural competency training for organizations and agencies, and advocacy around housing vouchers. They also provide case management, for example connecting a person kicked out of a nursing home with a variety of services such as a lawyer, social worker, Medicaid benefits specialist, and volunteer caller.

Mary’s House is about to break ground on its first brick-and-mortar independent living development, in partnership with Capital Impact Investors, Goldman Sachs, and the DC government. Fifteen rooms for people at 30-50 percent AMI will each have their own bathroom and small kitchenette, along with a variety of common areas intended to build a sense of family and community among LGBTQ+/SGL adults ages 60 and older. The development will include three permanent supportive housing units for previously homeless people and coordination of wraparound supports such as mental health agency services.

TONIC

In the 1970s-80s some members of the LGBTQ+/SGL[†] community in London created informal settlements where people could look out for one another. Yet these have gentrified and long since disappeared, and today LGBTQ+/SGL people are geographically dispersed in cities and often do not feel connected to their neighborhoods. **Tonic** is a community-led nonprofit housing provider created to address this need. As its name suggests, Tonic is about lifting people’s spirits and, according to CEO Anna Kear, “helping people feel they don’t have to come out every time they have a neighbourly chat.”



Photo: Tonic

[†] Tonic does not use the “Q” because the word “queer” was used in a derogatory way when today’s older adults grew up and it can make them feel excluded. However, TONIC CEO, Anna Kear, noted that since young people today have appropriated the word “queer” as an empowering one, this has begun to change the conversation.

In September 2021, Tonic created Tonic@Bankhouse, the UK's only LGBTQ+/SGL -affirming retirement community. It is sited in the London borough of Lambeth, which is significant both because Lambeth has the largest LGBTQ+/SGL community in the UK and because it was the location of a hospital where much of the electric shock treatment to eradicate homosexuality took place as late as the 1970s. To inform this and other projects, Tonic engages **community panels** comprised of volunteers 50 years and older, who are selected to ensure a diverse range of voices and experiences to consider and constructively challenge the work.

Tonic@Bankhouse is a 14-story development with 84 affordable one- to two-bedroom apartments, nineteen of which Tonic purchased from the nonprofit, **One Housing**. The mayor of London enabled this purchase through a £5.7M loan, illustrating the critical roles of local authorities in creating these types of high social value projects. Tonic manages its apartments through a shared ownership scheme wherein incoming residents can buy a 25-75 percent share of the apartment. Tonic retains 25 percent ownership in order to maintain community ownership in perpetuity, while One Housing owns and manages all the building's rented apartments.

The building design facilitates community through a variety of communal spaces, and Tonic provides a variety of LGBTQ+/SGL -affirming community events and activities. One Housing and other providers offer personal care and support services onsite, and Tonic ensures that staff is trained to create a safe, affirming space.



Photo: Tonic



Photo: Tonic

INTERGENERATIONAL HOUSING

A number of intergenerational LGBTQ+/SGL housing projects are also noteworthy. The 24-flat **Lebensort Vielfalt in Berlin** opened in 2012 and a second building is under construction. Residents are mostly younger and older gay men, some of whom receive nursing care services on-site. In France, the first **Maison de la Diversité** (or House of Diversity) will open in Lyon in 2023. The 30-unit rental development is presented as a multigenerational response to social isolation among older LGBTQ+/SGL people, where some units are intended for students who, in exchange for moderate rent, can assist those who are “a little less healthy.”

One Roof Chicago services mixed-income older adults and young people in need of affirming housing, meaningful connection, and career development. For LGBTQ+/SGL seniors, as well as older adults living with HIV, it provides a continuum of care as residents' needs for assistance increase. At the same time, it provides supportive housing for LGBTQ+/SGL young adults that includes job training in culturally competent senior care and thus a career ladder in a rapidly growing sector of the economy.

The Pryde in Boston provides an example of repurposing a building with a younger mission for senior living. The nonprofit will restore and convert the former Barton Rogers Middle School in Hyde Park into 74 units of mixed-income LGBTQ+/SGL senior housing with services—the first such housing development in New England. The Pryde developer, Pennrose Development, worked closely with SAGE to provide culturally competent services for staff as part of conversations about LGBTQ+/SGL elder identities, needs, and care. Their mantra was: “If we're going to do this, we will do it well and right.”

Replicability

There are a plethora of resources and an increasing number of examples for built environment professionals to visit, which can inform a commitment to creating LGBTQ+/SGL -affirming and inclusive environments, with culturally competent staff and programming where relevant. This presents a **rapidly growing market** for the broad senior living industry.