



Testimony of
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At the Oversight Hearing on “Social Work Services at
New York City Senior Centers”

The Sub Committee on Senior Centers

Hon. Erik Martin-Dilan, Chair

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Chairman Dilan, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today on the provision of social work services in New York City's senior centers. My name is Phillip A. Saperia, and I am the Executive Director of the Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, the umbrella advocacy organization of New York's mental health community, representing over 100 non-profit community-based mental health agencies in New York City and surrounding areas. Our members constitute a broad cross section of service providers – all sizes from very small to very large; treatment and rehabilitation-oriented; outpatient and residential; focused on linguistically and culturally specific populations and on many special-needs – serving more than 300,000 individuals in the five boroughs of New York City and its environs.

Our interest in today's hearing stems from our overall concern for the mental health needs of older New Yorkers. Many of our members provide mental health services to a geriatric population, and they tell us about the unique needs of older New Yorkers who are in need of psychiatric help. Some of those they help are individuals who develop symptoms such as dementia as they age; others are New Yorkers living with psychiatric disabilities who simply grow older and need additional services. The Coalition is actively involved in a statewide campaign that advocates for changes in mental health policy to meet the needs of older adults.

But our particular interest lies with the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered seniors who need ongoing mental health services. The Coalition is

heading up a small task force of providers and advocates to examine the unique needs of this population. For example, there is currently no stand-alone Article 31 clinic anywhere in New York City specifically geared to the unique needs of LGBT seniors. It is this particular concern that brings us before you today.

LGBT seniors potentially grapple with three areas of stigma – aging, mental health, and sexual orientation. For the current generation of older New Yorkers, the level of acceptance around gay and lesbian issues can be very low. We hear reports, for example, that older LGBT adults are more unlikely to seek services in senior centers than their heterosexual peers.

We know that the aged population in this country is growing, both nationally and here in New York. We know about the myriad of mental health needs that older New Yorkers face each day. We ask you and your colleagues in the City Council to take into account the unique needs of LGBT seniors with mental health needs as you develop the Council's planning around aging issues in the Fiscal 2006 budget. Over the course of the next several months, the Coalition will be further researching this issue and will be prepared to offer concrete recommendations that we believe will help meet the needs of this population.

We thank you for your time, and would be happy to answer any questions you might have.