

Creating a Home for L.G.B.T. Seniors in New York City

By Winnie Hu

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New York City may be a cradle of gay rights, but for many in the gay community it is still not an easy place to grow old.

Mary Ellen Green can attest to that. Her only refuge is a senior center in Manhattan that serves the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. She can sit down to a hot meal or settle in with a book without worrying about being harassed by her neighbors.

But when the center closes at night and on weekends, Ms. Green, 61, a freelance writer who is homeless, is on her own again.

Ms. Green could soon have somewhere to go. The operator of the senior center, SAGE, a nonprofit advocacy and service organization, is working with private developers to build New York City's first subsidized housing for older people like Ms. Green who need a place to live, may face discrimination from their neighbors, or simply want to spend their later years among those they feel most comfortable with.

While such targeted affordable housing is new to New York City, it has been built in a handful of other cities, including Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco, amid a growing recognition that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are more likely to need help as they grow older because many of them are single, have no children and may be estranged from their families. These elders can find themselves isolated in traditional retirement communities or nursing homes, advocates say, and in some cases, may even feel compelled to go back into the closet just to fit in.



A rendering of the Ingersoll Senior Residences, New York City's first senior housing complex for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Marvel Architects

Next month, work will begin on a \$78 million apartment building at the Ingersoll Houses, a public-housing project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, followed in the fall by a \$40 million building across from Crotona Park in the Bronx. Both buildings are expected to open in 2019 and will feature SAGE-run senior centers that will also serve the local communities.

“It would answer my prayers,” said Ms. Green, who has been living in church shelters and on the street since March. “We would all look out for each other, be our eyes and ears. I think that understanding and awareness would be there.”

More than 100,000 of New York City's 1.1 million residents 65 years and older are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, according to SAGE estimates. In recent years, the city has increased funding to expand senior centers and programs for them, but it has struggled to provide living spaces as the city faces an overall shortage of affordable housing.

“This is one place where we've been lagging behind, and it's time to catch up,” said Michael Adams, the chief executive of SAGE.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration has called for more affordable senior housing for this population. “Many older L.G.B.T. adults remember the discrimination they faced in housing and other sectors, and they were silenced for far too long,” said Donna Corrado, the commissioner of

the Department for the Aging. “The construction of housing for them creates a safe space and support system that allows L.G.B.T. seniors with limited incomes to live with dignity.”



Felicia Holley, 78, said that, as a lesbian, she looked forward to living in the Ingersoll Houses. “You need to have neighbors you can talk to freely,” she said. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Both buildings also aim to serve the homeless at a time when the city’s homeless population has soared. The Bronx building, the Crotona Senior Residences, will set aside 30 percent of its 84 apartments for older people who are homeless. It is the first collaboration between SAGE and HELP USA, a nonprofit that builds and manages homeless shelters and transitional and permanent housing for those who were homeless.

The Brooklyn building, the Ingersoll Senior Residences, will also designate 25 percent of its 145 studio and one-bedroom apartments for the homeless. The building, which is being built on land leased from the New York City Housing Authority, will also give preference for some units to residents in city housing projects.

While fair housing laws require that the buildings be open to anyone who meets the age and income qualifications, they are being heavily marketed to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. The 17-story Brooklyn building, which will have three outdoor terraces, will be the largest gay-friendly affordable housing for seniors in the country, according to the developer, BFC Partners.

“It’s our hope that we end up here with a building that is largely L.G.B.T. seniors or seniors who understand the L.G.B.T. community and are accepting of it,” said Donald A. Capoccia, a founder of BFC Partners.

The buildings will select residents by lottery. Mr. Adams pointed out that in similar affordable housing developments in other cities, between 60 and 90 percent of the units are occupied by L.G.B.T. seniors. “In a sense, it’s a self-selection process,” he said.



Ingersoll Houses, the site of New York City’s first senior housing complex for gay seniors, in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Ros Davis, 69, a retired electrician, said that while she liked her neighbors, the new housing would allow her to live around people she had more in common with. “I feel like I could really enjoy myself,” said Ms. Davis, who is a lesbian. “Especially as an L.G.B.T., you want to be around people you can relate to more.”

In turn, some Fort Greene residents said they welcomed their new neighbors. Bebe Saldana, 31, a housekeeper walking by the grassy corner where the building will rise, said that she would like to get to know some of the L.G.B.T. seniors. “They’re people,” she said. “They’re beautiful people at that.”

Deloris Harvin, 69, a retired day care worker, said she planned to check out the building for her 90-year-old uncle, Eugene Robinson, who is not gay. He recently moved in with her because other senior housing buildings had long waiting lists. Referring to the planned building, Mr. Robinson said, "I don't mind living there."

The Brooklyn building cannot open soon enough for Felicia Holley, 78, who is a lesbian. Ms. Holley, a retired word processing supervisor on a tight income, had to move in with her younger daughter in the Bronx four years ago because she could not find an apartment she could afford. "It's not comfortable," she said.

Ms. Holley has already walked around Fort Greene to see if she would like living there. She said she would.

"You need to have neighbors you can talk to freely," she said. "When you're younger, you can always go party out of your neighborhood, but when you're older, where can you go?"

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