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ASA UPDATE

ASA INTEREST GROUPS FOCUS ON LGBT ISSUES AND MENTAL HEALTH

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During the past few months, I have been pleased to provide updates on the activities of the constituent groups of the American Society on Aging (ASA). These groups, which focus on special-interest areas in aging from business to religion and spirituality, offer in-depth information and connect professionals who share specific concerns about current challenges and emerging issues facing older adults and their caregivers.

In this issue, we highlight two constituent groups working to promote key initiatives that advance ASA's 2005–2010 strategic plan. ASA has long been a leader in diversity and cultural competency related to aging. In the coming years, ASA plans to demonstrate a commitment to the broader meaning of diversity by finding ways that underserved elders who don't identify with racial or ethnic groups can strengthen ASA's work in the field by contributing their special perspectives. In addition, ASA seeks to infuse a strengths-based model of aging into its publications, conferences, member services and leadership-development activities. In contrast to the traditional model emphasizing elders' deficits and needs, strengths-based approaches affirm what older adults have to offer in improving quality of life for themselves and their communities.

The Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network (LGAIN) works to raise awareness about the special challenges that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people face as they age, as well as the unique barriers these often invisible populations encounter in gaining access to healthcare, long-term care, social services, housing and other needed support. LGAIN welcomes participation of all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, such as non-LGBT professionals who work with service populations having diverse sexual preferences. The network fosters multidisciplinary research and wide-ranging dialogue through publications and national conference programs, as well as regional educational offerings at ASA's Autumn Series on Aging.

More than 20 presentations at the Joint Conference of the National Council on Aging (NCOA) and ASA in Anaheim, Calif., last spring offered information on LGBT aging. These sessions included a wide range of topics, such as housing options, legal and policy issues, health and mental health concerns, elder abuse, and cultural competence for service providers. Among the special networking events for conference participants was a reception at The Center Orange County, the LGBT community center in nearby Garden Grove, Calif. LGAIN also joined four other ASA constituent groups in presenting a daylong special program during the conference, "End-of-Life Communications Before the Crisis," sponsored by the Archstone Foundation. In addition, a number of conference presentations discussed HIV/AIDS among older adults, including a special Critical Issues in Aging session sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline.

Now in its 12th year, LGAIN is one of the few national networks for LGBT professionals in the field of aging, as well as those serving the LGBT community. LGAIN members receive a quarterly newsletter called *OutWord*, a monthly e-mail update via *OutWord Online*, and information about timely events, research and other resources. LGAIN's home page, at www.asaging.org/lgain, offers an annotated guide to Web resources related to LGBT aging.

During the past year, LGAIN has worked to develop a new Web-based resource initiative. With the working title of "LGBT Aging Resources Clearinghouse," the project seeks to make research, program models, community resources and other vital information about LGBT aging readily available nationwide. The clearinghouse is a logical outgrowth of ASA's longstanding commitment to cultural competence in the field of aging. Since the 1970s, ASA's conferences, publications, programs and special projects have actively addressed LGBT concerns as a key aspect of the wide diversity of older adults. The clearinghouse project will enable ASA and LGAIN to deepen their collaboration with national and local organizations to ensure that the needs of LGBT elders are addressed.

Furthermore, we at ASA are excited that the clearinghouse project will permit us to reach beyond the traditional limits of the professional association by making LGAIN's expertise available to community members and groups outside the aging network, bringing various stakeholders into the process of creating and disseminating much-needed knowledge. To learn more about the clearinghouse project, or to make a financial contribution to support this initiative, visit www.asaging.org/donate_lgbt.cfm.

Later this summer, LGAIN will announce the results of the first-ever study of LGBT boomers. The landmark survey, funded by MetLife Mature Market Institute, addresses long-term care, retirement planning and support services, and will recommend actions to meet the evolving needs of the aging LGBT boomers.

The Mental Health and Aging Network (MHAN) is dedicated to improving interventions for older adults who have mental health concerns and supporting their caregivers. Now in its second decade, MHAN works to promote and implement training, research, communication and advocacy activities addressing the most compelling issues in the field. Many of MHAN's educational efforts advocate for services and programs that enhance the positive side of mental health for older adults and improve professionals' ability to work with difficult behaviors, as well as strengthen their assessment and treatment skills.

During the recent NCOA-ASA Joint Conference, MHAN collaborated with other organizations and experts to offer three special programs. These included "Critical Issues in Strengthening Mental Health and Aging Coalitions," presented in collaboration with the National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging; "Enhancing the Safety and Well-Being of Older Adults Through Age-Specific Emergency Preparedness Programs," in conjunction with the National Association of Geriatric Education Centers Bioterrorism and Emergency Preparedness Committee and ASA's Network of Multicultural Aging; and "Managing Challenging Behaviors: A Clinical Perspective." The conference also featured two special Critical Issues in Aging sessions titled "Alzheimer's Disease: Advances and Issues" and "Mental Health Promotion and Substance Abuse Prevention." Offered, too, were 32 sessions in the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders track and 60 sessions in the Behavioral Healthcare/Mental Health track.

MHAN members receive the quarterly publication *Dimensions*, which publishes the latest information on best practices, promising developments and leading-edge research. For more information, visit MHAN's home page at www.asaging.org/mhan.

Moreover, to recognize professional growth and contributions to the field of mental health and aging, MHAN created the Mental Health and Aging Award. This honor is presented annually to an outstanding practitioner or professional who has demonstrated continued excellence in providing mental health or dementia-care services to older adults and their families. Award winners have demonstrated a profound and lasting effect on the mental health of older adults through services, practices, teaching, research, advocacy or policy planning. The 2006 winner was Laura Trejo, currently general manager of the Department of Aging for the city of Los Angeles. Trejo previously worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health serving as the first countywide coordinator of older adult services. **Aging Today** highlighted her award in the last issue. To learn more about Trejo's contributions to the field, visit www.agingtoday.org, click on "Back Issues," go to May-June 2006 and scroll down to "2006 Mental Health Award."

To nominate an ASA member for the 2007 award, or to learn more about previous winners, visit www.asaging.org/asav2/awards/; click on "Mental Health and Aging Award."

For audio downloads, CDs or audiotapes of selected sessions from the 2006 Joint Conference sessions, visit <https://nrstaping.com/asa/>. And be sure to save the dates March 7–10, 2007, for next year's Joint Conference in Chicago. ❖