

Testimony at Hearing on the Older Americans Act Reauthorization

September 7, 2010 -- Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I want to thank Senator Herb Kohl and U.S. Assistant Secretary for Aging, Kathy Greenlee, for holding this hearing in Milwaukee to gather Wisconsinites' input into reauthorization of the Older Americans Act.

I am Loree Cook-Daniels, Policy and Program Director for FORGE, which is a 15-year-old, Milwaukee-based, national organization for transgender people and their significant others, friends, family and allies, including service providers and professionals who work with transgender individuals. We are very thankful to the Administration on Aging for funding the National Resource Center on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Aging, and are very pleased and proud that FORGE's Transgender Aging Network was asked to be a partner in that Center, the only one of 11 partners that is headquartered in the Midwest.

Since there are other people here and across the country who will be talking about the need to recognize the special needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders in the Older Americans Act reauthorization, I want to concentrate my testimony on the *particular* and *unique* needs of transgender elders, and why we are morally obligated to ensure we can respectfully and appropriately serve these elders.

Had the famous and groundbreaking transsexual Christine Jorgensen survived, she would now be 84 years old. While the positive impact Ms. Jorgensen had on transgender elders cannot be overestimated, we as a society have not taken responsibility for the costs and damage we inflicted on those who followed her through the doors she opened. If transgender people who are now 65 and older changed genders in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, the experts they consulted and who had to approve them before they could receive hormones and/or surgery were extremely conservative. Those experts would *not* prescribe hormones or do surgery on anyone who was married. Transgender people were *required* to divorce even loving spouses who wanted to stay married. If they would be gay or lesbian in their new gender, they weren't permitted to change genders at all. They were advised to *abandon* their children and have no further contact with them. They were strongly advised to leave their communities, move to somewhere where no one knew them, and make up fictional histories. They were told to never tell anyone about their gender history.

Let me spell it out: in a society where the majority of elder caregiving is done by family members, we stripped away transgender people's families.

That isn't all the damage we have done. The federal government has *still* not outlawed employment discrimination against transgender people, and as a result 97% of transgender people say they have been discriminated against or experienced harassment on the job. Transgender people also have outrageously high unemployment rates, which of course impacts retirement income. (I do want to thank Senator Kohl for co-sponsoring the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would begin correcting this problem.)

Discrimination against transgender people in health care insurance is also pervasive. Many health insurance policies specifically refuse to cover hormones and/or surgery for transgender people. What this means is that except for the very well-to-do, MOST transgender people are not going to have sex reassignment surgery, even if they want it. That means when it comes to health care and intimate home care where people are disrobed,

transgender people are automatically “outed” as transgender. As a result, MANY transgender people would literally rather die than go to a doctor or get in-home assistance where their transgender history would be revealed.

But that’s still not all we as a society have done to transgender people who are now elders. We have also made it extremely difficult for them to change their legal gender, so even if they *are* heterosexual and want to marry someone of the opposite gender, courts have sometimes ruled these marriages invalid. This would of course not be a problem if we simply made marriage available to any qualified couple regardless of gender, but the Defense of Marriage Act that Senator Kohl voted for helps create the situation where transgender people’s marriages are legally questionable. That means elders may not get the Social Security survivor’s benefits they and their spouse paid for.

So let me summarize. As a society, we are so upset about people who don’t have typical gender identities that we have: forced them to divorce loving spouses, abandon their children, lose their jobs, not allowed them to get surgeries they want or need, and made it difficult for them to marry opposite-sex as well as same-sex partners.

Senator Kohl and Assistant Secretary Greenlee, I hope the very brief description of transgender elders’ situation that I have given here has helped you understand why it is absolutely critical – and morally necessary – for the aging network to learn about the specific needs of elders who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, to conduct special outreach to these very vulnerable and often fearful populations, and to design services that ensure these elders are not discriminated against or denigrated by either service providers or other clients. We owe these pioneers that much.

Thank you.