



sage | Advocacy & Services for LGBT Elders  
National Resource Center on LGBT Aging

# How to Be an Ally to Transgender Older Adults





FORGE reduces the impact of trauma on trans/non-binary survivors and communities by empowering service providers, advocating for systems reform, and connecting survivors to healing possibilities. FORGE strives to create a world where ALL voices, people and bodies are valued, respected, honored, and celebrated; where every individual feels safe, supported, respected, and empowered.

[forge-forward.org](http://forge-forward.org)



The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging is the country's first and only technical assistance resource center aimed at improving the quality of services and supports offered to lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender older adults. Established in 2010 through a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging provides training, technical assistance and educational resources to aging providers, LGBT organizations and LGBT older adults. The center is led by SAGE, in collaboration with leading aging and LGBT organizations from around the country.

[lgbtagingcenter.org](http://lgbtagingcenter.org)

For 40-plus years, SAGE has worked tirelessly on behalf of LGBT older people. Building off the momentum of the Stonewall uprising and the emerging LGBT civil rights movement, a group of activists came together to ensure that LGBT older people could age with respect and dignity. SAGE formed a network of support for LGBT elders that's still going and growing today. SAGE is more than just an organization. It's a movement of loving, caring activists dedicated to providing advocacy, services, and support to older members of the LGBT community. LGBT elders fought—and still fight—for our rights. And we will never stop fighting for theirs.

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“During this journey, I’ve had the opportunity to meet several other trans women.

Again, I see each one of them having been placed into my life for a reason. They have all been an example to me in the true sense of living an authentic life.

I cannot begin to fathom the amount of strength, courage and perseverance that it takes to fully transition.

If these remarkable women can do this, then I have to challenge myself to become the best that I can be and to be the best ally possible to this community, if only because of what they have done for me.”

– MICHELLE ALEXANDER,  
***AUTHOR OF THE COLOR OF SUNSHINE***



# How to Be an Ally to Transgender Older Adults

What does it mean to be an “ally”? There are, of course, many definitions: to advocate for, to join forces with, to support. At its best, it can also mean to befriend, to learn from, to fall in love with. We hope this guide prepares you to be both kinds of ally: someone who not only gives, but also receives. For, if you open your heart, you will find that transgender older adults have much to give.

## Who Transgender Older Adults Are

Broadly speaking, transgender (or “trans”) people have a gender identity that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. For some of us, gender identity is so straightforward it is practically invisible: a newborn is examined, labeled a female, treated throughout her life in stereotypically female ways, and always thinks of herself as a female. Transgender people show that this progression is not always so straightforward. Often quite early in life, they realize the common pathway doesn’t fit them: inside, who they are doesn’t fit the gender others think they are. Perhaps when others see a girl, they know themselves to be a boy. Or vice versa. Increasingly, a number of trans people (especially younger people) are saying they are neither girl nor boy but something else: a mix, neither, a unique blend, or something else.



■ Tracie, 65, San Diego, California, 2017

These “non-binary” (binary being male/female) individuals use a wide variety of historical and brand-new labels for their identities.

### Who Trans Older Adults Aren’t

Common beliefs about gender identity are confusingly tangled with those about sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to the gender identities of the people one is attracted to or partner romantically or sexually with. Just as we tend to have an invisible but ubiquitous belief that being labeled a boy at birth means a person will grow up to be a man, we also believe that if you are male, you’ll be attracted to women. That isn’t true, of course. People can label themselves as gay/lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or any number of sexual orientations. That is also true of transgender people: they may be attracted to men, women, other transgender people, everyone, no one, or any combination. Despite sexual orientation and gender identity being separate things, they are often grouped together as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). It is common to see people add additional letters and categories such as intersex, queer, questioning, ally, etc.

### How Many Trans People There Are

In general we know how large a population is because someone counts them. In the U.S., it’s usually the federal government that does the counting, by census or through survey sampling. To date, almost no federal

effort has counted trans people. Besides not asking, there is a lot of not telling. Because there is so much discrimination, stigma, and violence directed at trans people, many trans people do not identify themselves as such even if asked; it would just be too dangerous if the news got out. In addition, some trans people say they were only “trans” when they were actively shifting—“transitioning”—from living as one gender to living as another. Post-transition, they identify simply as male or female. This publication sometimes uses the phrase “trans status or history” to include both those who still identify as trans and those who no longer identify that way.

So we are left with only estimates of the size of the trans community. UCLA’s Williams Institute estimates that .6% of the population is trans. Other estimates are a little higher. What is clear is that the number is likely to increase as youth are identifying as trans or non-binary at a rapidly increasing rate.

### About the Terms

You may have heard that there are many “kinds” of trans people, such as cross-dressers, transsexuals, transgender people, MTFs (male-to-females) and FTMs (female-to-males), and many more. How do you tell the difference? You don’t, because the definitions and boundaries vary from person to person. What you want to know is if there is a term the older adult uses for themselves; if there is, use it!



**ALLIES DON’T NEED TO KNOW A TRANS VOCABULARY.** They need to know what term someone uses for themselves, and then use that term when talking with that person. That practice not only conveys respect, but helps avoid completely unnecessary arguments about who belongs in what category.

What is critical is the person's name and the pronouns they use. Ask if you are unsure of either. If you slip up and use the wrong pronoun (or the old name, if you knew the person before they transitioned), apologize, say you'll try to do better, and move on. Excessive apologies make everyone uncomfortable. If the trans older adult is sometimes misgendered (addressed with the wrong pronoun or name) by other people, privately ask the person how they would prefer such incidents be handled in the future. Do they want you to correct someone, do they want to do the correcting, or do they prefer to just let the mistake slide?

## Transitioning

As mentioned already, "transitioning" is the term that refers to the period in which a person shifts from living as one gender to living as another. There are many choices to be made during transition, and many ways to transition. People often transition socially, meaning they tell people about their identity and may shift how they dress or groom themselves to send different gender cues (also called "gender expression"). They may change their name, and will likely begin going by another pronoun. Some people use medical means to change their body, such as taking hormones or having one or more surgeries. None of these changes are "required" to call yourself transgender.

When someone who was assigned male at birth transitions to female, she is called a woman or a trans woman.

When someone who was assigned female at birth transition to male, he is called a man or a trans man.



Diego, 59, Washington, DC, 2016

## Historical Crossroads

Some cultures have or had an identified role for what we now call transgender people. In societies without a named role, scattered individuals have chosen to live as what was then called the "other" or "opposite" sex. For example, there were multiple Civil War soldiers who turned out to have been assigned female at birth.

Most people in mainstream U.S. culture, however, had never heard of "sex changes" until news of Christine Jorgensen, who transitioned in the 1950s, hit the papers. Even after Ms. Jorgensen, many people had no idea that people existed who didn't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. That began changing with the development of the internet. Suddenly people in the privacy of their homes and with the help of powerful search

engines began researching their feelings and discovered they weren't "the only one." There were not only names for their feelings, but actions they could take to live more in line with their identity.

Many of the people who finally learned about trans identities from the internet were already adults with careers, marriages, and children. They also were typically aware of the cultural pushback happening around the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement. Fear of losing their families and careers, as well as concern about anti-trans stigma, discrimination, and violence, kept many of these individuals from transitioning or coming out. Instead, many of them doubled-down on trying to reconcile themselves to the sex they were assigned at birth. (This, by the way, is likely one of the reasons why a higher percentage of transgender people are military veterans, as well as explaining why so many trans women had very "macho" careers.)

This history has resulted in the trans older adult population having several cohorts. A few people who are now older adults have lived their whole adult lives in their affirmed gender. Another cohort is those who transitioned in the 1970s to 1990s and who have now aged into their older adult years. A large proportion, however, are people who transitioned later in life. Often these people have waited until there was another life change:

adult children left home, a marriage broke up, or they retired. A significant number experience a serious health scare and realize that they do not want to die regretting never being their real selves.

### Late-life Transition

It is critical to remember that a late-life transition typically affects many people in addition to the person who is transitioning: spouse, children, perhaps grandchildren, co-workers, neighbors, and many others. This is true for all ages of trans people, but older adults' relationships are generally more long-standing, which may make them harder to shift. If a daughter has called someone mother all 35 years of her life, she may have trouble seeing that person as a man. If minor children are in the family, parents may worry the transition will "confuse" them, and may even deny visitation to the trans older adult. (Younger children are not confused by gender changes simply because they haven't yet learned that gender is supposed to be permanent. For them, someone changing their gender is just one new fact among the hundreds they learn daily. Older children may need more help reconciling what they had previously been told with the new developments.)

Spouses may have particularly tough adjustment problems. Prevailing beliefs about gender and sexual orientation link the two:



**THE MOST IMPORTANT GIFT AN ALLY CAN GIVE IS UNCONDITIONAL LISTENING.** Ask questions only to help clarify the family member's thinking; give advice *only* if it's asked for (if then!). Do ask whether the person wants to be connected with other spouses, adult children, or other family members who have adjusted to their loved one's gender change; it can make a critical difference when people realize that divorce or rejection are not the only options.



■ Louis, 54, Springfield, Massachusetts, 2014

if you are a woman in love with a woman, you are labeled a lesbian. So heterosexual partners may wonder, “if my partner transitions, will that make me lesbian/gay?” If the non-transitioning spouse decides they can own their own sexual orientation regardless of the gender of their partner, they will still fall into the ironic position of having their partner’s transition put them in a closet. The very transition that makes the spouse’s gender identity public totally obscures the partner’s sexual orientation. The partner will always have to counter observers’ beliefs that she is a lesbian because her partner is a woman. A parallel dilemma can affect lesbian/gay couples when one partner transitions: now they will look heterosexual even if the partner does not identify as such.

There are, of course, other issues, as well. Will a spouse still be attracted to a partner of another gender? Are there retirement plans that will have to be altered? What should family members call the transitioned older adult? How will others be informed of the changes? Although many couples and families find their way through these changes, others crumble. [PFLAG](#)—both its national resources and its local chapters—can be a resource for family members.

Because of the 2015 Supreme Court decision of *Obergefell vs. Hodges* requiring states to recognize same-sex marriages, one thing that is no longer an issue is the validity of the couple’s marriage: It isn’t affected even when one partner changes gender.



# Helping Someone Through Transition

A transitioning person or family member may need gentle reminders that as overwhelming as a transition may seem, it will actually take place step-by-step; it's unnecessary to answer all the questions and make all the decisions at once.

## Am I or Am I Not?

Speaking of making all the decisions at once, many people spend years if not decades trying to understand and/or accept their gender identity. It takes a lot of time to unwind everything society has taught us about gender and sexuality and put those pieces back together in a new way that finally fits our truth. Not only that, but that truth can change with time. Often when trans people come to a conclusion and make the decision to transition genders, they feel great urgency to make it happen. This urgency can be

highly disconcerting to family members and friends. Often they had no idea their family member or friend was wrestling with their gender identity, so the whole idea may seem to come out of left field. Family members typically also need to go through the same mental deconstruction-and-reconstruction of what they “knew” about gender and sexuality to accommodate the new reality, which can take both effort and time. How much time the process is allowed to take, particularly if transition steps are put on hold, is therefore often a point of contention within couples and families.



**IF YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT SOMEONE THROUGH THEIR GENDER TRANSITION, YOU CAN BE EXTREMELY HELPFUL— IF YOU STAY IN YOUR LANE!** Most people, trans or not, will ask for advice if they want it. More often, we simply want someone to share with or “witness” what is happening in our lives. Most of us can also use a friend who is positive and hopeful, who reassures us that we can handle the things we are facing.



**IF AN OLDER ADULT YOU KNOW IS QUESTIONING THEIR GENDER, ENCOURAGE THEM TO TAKE THEIR TIME MAKING A DECISION.** It is important that people who are questioning understand that they have many more choices than the gender binary: they can mix and match.

If an older adult you know is questioning their gender identity, there is no need to push them to make a decision. People have transitioned—including obtaining surgery—in their 70s and 80s and even older, so they likely have more time to think about it. Also, what has changed in the last few decades is that more gender identity options have emerged. When people transitioned before the 1990s, most people thought gender was binary: you were either male or female. If you were transgender, it meant you jumped from one of those two boxes into the other. Some of the people who made this change years later decided their new gender wasn't exactly a great fit, either. Nowadays younger people have pioneered a huge range of non-binary options: agender, genderqueer, and much more. Some older adults are also adopting these non-binary identities. So it's important for people who are questioning to know they actually have a lot of options to consider.

### **Do I Need Medical Assistance?**

A lot of myths circulate about what it means to be transgender. One of the most common is that transgender people must take hormones and obtain surgery to alter at least some of their primary and secondary sex characteristics. This is simply not true. There are many ways for someone to change their appearance if they want to, and many trans people are fine with the body they have. In some cases, trans older adults can't access hormones or surgery for medical reasons, or their health insurance and finances are

inadequate. This health insurance problem is, thank goodness, changing quickly as discriminatory exclusion provisions affecting only trans people are withdrawn.

One thing to consider is that if trans older adults do not have gender affirmation surgery, their body parts will automatically “out” them as transgender any time they need to be naked at a doctor's office or in a hospital or nursing home. People who see their body will realize that whatever gender the person presented as, their history is more



■ Linda, 60, Chicago, Illinois, 2016

complicated than that. This situation may result in the professional or observer being verbally abusive or disrespectful. Some trans older adults respond to this possibility by refusing to get health care or leave their home when they can no longer manage living on their own. There are many stories of transgender people who were not “discovered” to be transgender until they died because they refused to be seen by medical professionals.

Most any general practice physician can prescribe and monitor hormones; an endocrinologist is not needed. Although trans hormone protocols are easily available on the web (see the [Resources](#) section), physician practices vary widely. Some, for instance, reduce hormone levels for trans women after a typical menopausal age, and others don't.

Trans-related surgeries are a different matter. These are highly specialized surgeries that should only be done by surgeons with specific training and experience. Often trans people have to travel to a surgeon and secure housing and caregiving for the immediate post-surgical period. There may also be additional out-of-network insurance barriers to hurdle.

Any organs that are not surgically removed need to be checked regularly. Trans men, for example, still need periodic pap smears and checks of any breast tissue, and trans women need prostate check-ups.

## Do I Need Therapy?

It used to be that no physician would prescribe hormones and no surgeon would do trans-related operations until a therapist had seen the trans person for a lengthy period of time and written “the letter.” (Some surgeons, especially, required *two* letters.) “The letter” basically said the person was competent and understood what it meant to transition genders. Many times to get a letter, trans people also had to live publicly for a year or so in their new gender role, even if that was difficult without hormones and surgery.

These “Standards of Care” (see [Resources](#) section) were laid out by what is now called the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). The Standards have been revised many times, and now they are much less restrictive than they used to be. In addition, many physicians and surgeons have adopted “informed consent” or similar models that treat transgender patients the same way everyone else gets treated: The physician lays out the pros and cons of a given medical procedure or medication, the patient can ask questions, and then the patient makes an informed choice whether to go ahead or not. Thus, therapy is no longer required for everyone.

Which is not to say it's not helpful! A therapist with a lot of experience with transgender people and their families can definitely help with thinking through options and resolving conflicts. FORGE has a whole publication to help trans people select a therapist



**SEEING A PHYSICIAN—PARTICULARLY A NEW ONE—CAN BE SCARY.** Your friend may or may not be happy to have you in the exam room with them. Driving with them to the doctor and sitting with them in the waiting room may be quite welcome. If your friend agrees with you taking this role, allies should advocate if they observe mistreatment or disrespect.



**AN OFFER TO ACCOMPANY THE TRANS OLDER ADULT WHILE THEY ARE INTERVIEWING POSSIBLE THERAPISTS MIGHT FEEL SUPPORTIVE TO THEM.** Certainly you could help them sort through their feelings if they have several options to consider.

who matches their needs; it's available for download at [forge-forward.org/resource/lets-talk-about-it-a-transgender-survivors-guide-to-accessing-therapy](https://forge-forward.org/resource/lets-talk-about-it-a-transgender-survivors-guide-to-accessing-therapy). It is possible to find lists of therapists who work with transgender people on the internet (*Psychology Today* has one at [psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/transgender](https://psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/transgender)), although you might be better off checking with your local trans or LGBT group for recommendations. You can also get recommendations from the SAGE National LGBT Elder Hotline at 1-877-360-LGBT (5428).

## What Do I Do About My ID?

The number of documents that have our name—and, often, our gender on them—is pretty amazing. There are the usual, of course: our driver's license, employee badge, bank account, credit card accounts. Then there are the ones that are less easily remembered: our auto club, homeowner/renter/car insurances, consumer membership cards.

And then there are the historical ones: birth certificate, marriage license, mortgage or renter agreements, wills, powers of attorney, educational records.

And much more. A key task when transitioning is to figure out what identification *needs*

to be changed for safety, legal, or financial reasons, and which can be left alone. For example, some people feel it's critical to change their birth certificate (which is still not possible in every state). Many trans people, however, figure they have no particular reason to do so.

Changing identification can feel exciting and affirming, scary, or impossible (particularly if there are fees involved the trans person can't afford).

## What About My Job?

Thankfully, most employers are now forbidden from firing or taking an adverse action against a transitioning employee. That doesn't mean transitioning on the job is easy! There are online guides that can help a trans person plan their workplace coming-out (see the [Resources](#) section).



**AN ALLY CAN HELP SOMEONE FIND INFORMATION AND WHAT'S REQUIRED IN EACH STATE** (see the [Resources](#) section). Allies can also provide physical help (such as driving) or emotional support as the older adult navigates the assorted bureaucracies.

# Trans Older Adult Issues

Aside from the transition tasks that generally only have to be completed one time, there are many other issues trans older adults need to deal with.

## Medical Care

Since the U.S. currently lacks universal health care, older adults—with their statistical tendency to need more medical care than younger adults—are often very concerned about health care. If they are old enough to access Medicare, the good news is that it mostly covers all the care trans people may need (check the [Resources](#) section for more information). If an older adult is still covered by their employer’s or their own health insurance, the picture is much murkier. It used to be common for health insurance companies to have an “exclusion” in their written policies that said they would not cover any trans-related health care. In practice, this sometimes meant that they wouldn’t even cover routine health care, arguing (incorrectly!) that most medical issues were somehow related to a trans person’s hormones or surgery.



■ Debbie, 61, & Danny, 66, St. Joseph, Missouri, 2015

The Affordable Care Act outlawed such exclusions for participating insurance companies, but that protection was rolled back by the Trump Administration and the provision never covered some companies, including self-funded corporations. Older adults without any insurance at all often had a hard time covering even hormones; many resorted to black market sources that did not require prescriptions or lab monitoring, which of course also increased their riskiness. The Biden Administration is reinstating the trans protections, but it is still common for trans older adults to have to fight to get their needed health care covered. Allies can help in such cases by connecting affected older adults with experienced advocates who have successfully fought such exclusions (see [Resources](#) section). Once the older adult has an experienced advocate, allies can focus on emotionally supporting the older adult through the often-arduous appeals process.

**If an older adult is turned down for medically necessary services, advocates can help by connecting the older adult with experienced advocates who have successfully fought some exclusions (see [Resources](#) section). Once the older adult has an experienced advocate, allies can focus on emotionally supporting them through the often-arduous appeals process.**

Another typical medical care issue is, simply, the competence and respectfulness of the health care professional the older adult needs to consult. About one-third of trans people who see a health care provider in any given year say they had at least one negative experience. Occasionally these even include assaults. These experiences—whether the older adult has experienced

them directly or has “only” heard about them happening to others—can make a trans older adult very reluctant to seek even emergency care. Allies can help by offering to accompany an older adult to their appointments, to serve as a witness/advocate if needed. If the health care provider is open, the ally can also point them to online resources on health care for trans patients, to help them become more competent (see [Resources](#) section).

**Allies can help reduce fears of health care mistreatment by offering to accompany an older adult to health care appointments. If the health care professional seems open, allies can also point them to online resources on health care for trans patients (see [Resources](#) section).**

## Discrimination and Violence

Unfortunately, discrimination against trans people is still rampant. Outright violence and abuse are also way too common. Despite the impression that news or social media may give, trans people are actually far more likely to experience intimate partner violence (even if they are partnered with another trans person) and sexual assault (usually by someone they know) than they are to fall victim to a random hate crime or murder.

**Allies can help prevent or address discrimination in public accommodations by going with an older adult as a witness and/or advocate, and helping them figure out what actions they may want to take if a problem does occur (see [Resources](#) section).**

If a trans person lives in an urban area where they are connected to other trans people, often they will ask around to find out what local businesses and professionals have treated trans clients well in the past. Much of the time, however, entering a new place is risky business. Here is another place allies can help by offering accompaniment as a witness and/or advocate. If a trans older adult is disrespected or mistreated and they and the ally cannot get it immediately addressed, allies can emotionally support the older adult and help them figure out what actions they may want to take next (see [Resources](#) section).

**Is the older adult you are connected to sometimes misgendered by strangers? A very simple and effective way to help prevent such problems is to speak first and refer to your companion by a gendered term: “My sister/niece/aunt/girlfriend or brother/nephew/uncle/boyfriend here would like....” The term you use does not have to be accurate so long as it is gendered (and your companion isn’t taken aback by it!).**

As mentioned, it is quite common for trans people to experience intimate partner violence (IPV): figures of lifetime exposure go as high as 50%. Anyone who has had contact with family violence knows that such situations are often very tricky; mixtures of love and fear make thinking and decision-making very difficult. If the trans older adult you are working with is an abuser (or is also abusive, in couples where the abuse is bilateral), ask them if they want to change. If they do want to change, try to link them with a competent therapist experienced in working with abusive couples (see [Resources](#) section). If they are being victimized, try to get them to sit with you in

a private place and think through a safety plan to help them decrease their chances of being seriously hurt. FORGE has a trans-specific safety plan at [forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/safety-planning-tool.pdf](https://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/safety-planning-tool.pdf).

**In addition to providing an empathetic ear, allies of people in an abusive couple can try to connect them with experienced therapists and/or help them create a safety plan.**

Tragically, sexual assault of trans people is also common, with about half of trans people reporting they have survived at least one such assault. If the assault has just happened, check pages 109-110 in FORGE’s [Transgender Sexual Assault Survivors’ Self Help Guide to Healing and Understanding](#) for immediate advice. If the older adult is still working through an earlier assault, the rest of the above self-help guide can be an invaluable source of information and comfort.

**An ally of a trans person healing from sexual assault can offer to read [Transgender Sexual Assault Survivors’ Self Help Guide to Healing and Understanding](#) with them.**

If the trans older adult experiences other kinds of violence like a hate crime or random burglary, they may be reluctant to involve law enforcement. This is self-protection; many trans people have not had good experiences with law enforcement, even when they were the victim. Allies can help in such cases by nonjudgmental listening (again!) and offering to be with the older adult if they do decide to report.

**Allies can help when victimized older adults are deciding whether to report a crime to law enforcement through nonjudgmental listening and offering to be with the older adult if they do decide to report.**

## Mental Health Issues

Belonging to a stigmatized minority can take a terrible toll on a person's mental health. Surveys show that trans people experience exceptionally high rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Studies also show that having supportive personal relationships can help mitigate some of these problems, and supportive personal relationships are right up allies' alley! Trans older adults experiencing serious issues can be encouraged to find a therapist (see the [Resources](#) section) and/or psychiatrist, and routinely take any prescribed medications. Allies can also help by creating reasons for the older adult to move, as any amount of movement/exercise has been shown to support mental health.

**Give a depressed or anxious older adult reasons to move and encourage them to access mental health care if they are experiencing severe mental health issues. Offer a supportive ear.**

## Veterans' Issues

Both trans women and trans men are more likely to be military veterans than are their same age peers. Trans veterans who are not connected with Veterans Administration (VA) programs may have shied away for fear of being mistreated

there. In fact, the VA has been extraordinarily progressive in addressing trans issues. In addition to issuing directives and covering trans-related medical care (see [Resources](#) section), many VAs offer trans or LGBT support groups. An ally can do a little research on what may be available at the appropriate VA facility and pass that information along to an older adult trans veteran.

**If an older adult trans veteran isn't connected with their local VA, an ally can research whether that VA offers trans-specific services.**



■ Preston, 52, East Haven, Connecticut, 2016

## Religion

Religion or spiritual beliefs play an important part in many people’s lives. Religious trans older adults may be connected to a church, synagogue, or mosque, or they may have been pushed out of their spiritual home. If the latter is the case, it’s important to realize that many faiths have changed and are now affirming of their LGBT members (see [Resources](#) section). An ally can research what may be available in a trans older adult’s area, and offer to accompany them for some trial visits.

**You can research LGBT-affirming faiths if the trans older adult is interested in finding a spiritual home.**



David, 63, Hull, Massachusetts, 2015

## Employment

Despite laws that protect trans workers from job discrimination or harassment, it can happen. A definite option is to file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and/or file a lawsuit. FORGE has trans-specific materials on how sexual harassment laws can assist certain victims ([forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FAQ-Sexual-Harassment-FINAL.pdf](https://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FAQ-Sexual-Harassment-FINAL.pdf)).

Finding new employment as a trans older adult may well be difficult, even though discrimination based on age and gender identity are generally illegal. However, there is help. A search engine can find resources—including both job hunting advice and job listings—for trans people looking for work.

**Allies to job hunters and/or those who have experienced employment discrimination can likely use someone who is both sympathetic (“these things are hard!”) and a cheerleader (“you have what it takes”). Find and pass along trans-specific advice and leads.**

## Financial Issues

Any of us can run into financial problems. Many people do not know what public assistance programs are available to them, or they may feel that such programs are not for them. Allies may be able to help by researching what programs the older adult may be eligible for and helping them apply. If at least part of the problem is credit card debt, there are numerous agencies—including some that are non-profit and provide free services—that may be able to put the older adult back on

track. Local resources like food banks may also be helpful. If the issue is short-term, it may be possible to utilize some of the newer means of raising emergency funds through online fundraising platforms.

A good place to start locating available public benefits is here: [usa.gov/benefits](https://www.usa.gov/benefits).

## Aging Services

Many of us will at some point need help with daily activities of living due to illness, injury, or disability. A good place to start is your local area agency on aging (in small states, it may be the state agency on aging). These organizations manage services funded by the federal Older Americans Act. It may be that the older adult will qualify for Meals on Wheels or another service that is just enough to keep them in their home. Find the agency for your area here: [n4a.org](https://n4a.org). You can also go through the [Eldercare Locator](https://www.eldercare.gov) to find local services.

If you are making arrangements for such services, it is important to understand that most service providers do NOT need to know that someone is transgender. Particularly when we're trying to find "safety" for a trans person, it may seem like information we need to disclose. This is incorrect. Service providers should be respectful to all of their clients, and being transgender is private medical information much like being diabetic or having a hip replacement. While it is becoming increasingly common to see questions on intake forms asking for a person's gender identity and sexual orientation, the choice to disclose this information is personal.

**The trans person should always be in control over who knows about their trans status or history.**

## Long-Term Care

If the older adult needs more help, options may include short-term or long-term health care in their existing home. The next option may be moving to assisted living, where there are watchful eyes as well as a range of services. Some older adults need nursing home care, either for short-term rehabilitation or long-term care.

Many older adults are leery of these services. They all require the loss of some degree of privacy. This may be especially important to a trans older adult, as noted above. This is not an easy problem to solve, especially if the services sometimes involve disrobing (toileting, assistance with bathing, or assistance with changing clothes) and the older adult has not altered their genitals through surgery. Finding a provider who has a proven track record of good care of trans older adults can be quite difficult. If there is a SAGE in your community or an LGBT Community Center, they may have referrals. Another option is talking to local trans people or a trans organization.

The SAGECare training and credentialing program maintains a searchable database of providers who have completed LGBT cultural competency training available here: [sageusa.org/care](https://www.sageusa.org/care). The Long-term Care Equality Index (LEI) a joint program of SAGE and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRCF) works to identify long-term care communities who have adopted or are in the process of adopting LGBTQ inclusive policies and procedures. The results of this work is available here: [theLEI.org](https://www.theLEI.org).

If an ally is going to take any role in the process of finding long-term care, the mandatory first step is determining how the older adult wants to handle their trans

status or history. Are they okay with you calling a service and asking for their experience working with trans older adults? If the type of service permits, do they want to try to keep their transness completely private? Are they ok with someone else “outing” them, or do they want to be the one who reveals their gender identity? These are critical issues and decisions that bear heavily on how safe the trans older adult will feel; do not skip them.

If the older adult does enter a nursing home or other long-term care facility, find out who the ombudsman is and how to contact them. Ombudsmen are supposed to advocate for the patient no matter how they may feel about what the patient wants, and so are likely to be a good resource for a trans resident even if they don’t have experience with trans older adults. Every facility is supposed to display a poster that says how to contact the appropriate ombudsman, but you can also start here (a directory of state ombudsmen who may link you with a local ombudsman): [theconsumervoice.org/get\\_help](http://theconsumervoice.org/get_help).

The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging has additional resources available to help support decision making and encourage LGBT person-directed supports in long-term care at: [lgbtagingcenter.org/caregiving](http://lgbtagingcenter.org/caregiving).

**Allies MUST follow the older adult’s preferences about whether and how their trans status or history is disclosed if an ally is helping a trans older adult find long-term care.**

## End-of-Life Issues

End of life discussions are never easy, but they are essential for ensuring a person’s wishes are known and followed. This can be especially important for transgender older adults who may not have the support

of family to follow their end-of-life issues. [Creating End-of-Life Documents for Trans Individuals: An Advocate’s Guide](#) is an excellent, four-page guide covering healthcare powers of attorney, advance directives or living wills, and disposition of bodily human remains.

## Dementia

It seems common for people to worry about the tragedy of a trans older adult with dementia forgetting the gender identity they worked so hard to achieve; this is a common theme in the sparse literature on trans people with dementia. This may be one of those instances where it is helpful to separate your own feelings from the older adult’s: is it really such a terrible loss if the older adult doesn’t recognize it as a loss at all? Dementia commonly leads to things observers see as a loss but the person with dementia may not, such as people with dementia who forget who their spouses and children are. In the author’s family, a couple together for more than 50 years had to be moved into separate apartments on different floors of their assisted living facility when one of them developed floridly negative delusions about the other.

The expert advice on dealing with memory losses or delusions is to avoid arguing or trying to convince the person of the truth or reality. Instead acknowledge their emotions, reassure them of their safety if they are upset, and then try to divert their attention. If an older adult with dementia wants to change their wardrobe or haircut or be known by their original name, do so. What is important is their current comfort.

## Grief and Loss

Like dementia, grief differs little for people who are transgender and those who are not

transgender. The bereaved trans older adult may feel more comfortable (or not!) accessing LGBT-specific resources. If the older adult uses Facebook, there is a very active LGBT Grief Loss Support group. Some SAGE Centers and Affiliates ([sageusa.org](http://sageusa.org)) as well as LGBT Community Centers sponsor grief groups; check Centerlink's directory ([lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters](http://lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters)) for contact information for the Center closest to the trans older adult.

**In matters of dementia, grief, and loss allies should remember to separate their own feelings from what the trans older adult wants and needs. As always, nonjudgmental listening can be a great balm for a troubled soul.**

## Intersectionality

Trans older adults come in many shapes and colors. If the trans older adult you know is Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC), belongs to a stigmatized religion, has one or more disabilities or chronic illnesses, or faces other types of stigma, stereotyping, and discrimination, the path they must walk is likely to be more difficult. One minority status simply adds to another. For example, an older Black trans woman may well be dealing with ageism and racial and gender biases, as well as the trans issues we've been discussing.

They also may have multiple pools of resiliency to drink from. Does the older adult have a religious tradition that addresses good ways of coping? Can they talk about ancestors who exhibited courage and perseverance? Do they live in a neighborhood where people help each other or even just hang out together? Are they now or have

they been associated with a hobby or interest group that makes them feel like they belong and have value? Living at the intersections, while difficult for many, can also be a place of strength and resilience.

**Allies should always keep their eyes and imagination open to identify and call attention to a trans older adult's strengths. Most people can use reminders of our good qualities and emotional assets.**



■ Gloria, 70, Chicago, Illinois, 2016



■ Andrea, 54, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2016



# Creating a Liveable Life

So far this publication has mostly focused on how to deal with challenges a trans older adult may face. But no one's life should consist only of challenges, and allies can help with the joyful parts, too.



## Celebrate Milestones

Milestones should be acknowledged and celebrated. If the older adult is transitioning, they may want to celebrate changing their name, starting hormones, or getting a gender marker changed (one trans woman sent out an email with the subject line, “I got an F!”). Suggest a ceremony or ritual to mark the older adult's new life, a sort of bar or bat mitzvah. Such celebrations do not need to be elaborate; even a small dinner out may be recognition enough.



## Mark Birthdays, Anniversaries, and Holidays

Unless such occasions bring up memories of painful traumas, encourage the trans older adult to mark birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays in some way. Some people fall out of practice with these, and may benefit from again marking the seasons and holidays, and celebrating with others.



## Attend Trans Events

The oldest trans “holiday” is November 20th's Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR), held to commemorate trans people who have been murdered. TDoR is very important to many trans people, and hundreds of communities hold TDoR events. At the same time, some critics have pointed out that TDoR encourages trans people to identify with murder victims, and can create unwarranted fear that may cause a trans person to limit their activities in an effort to lower their risk of being murdered. Fortunately, other trans-related commemorative days have been launched since TDoR emerged, such as Trans Day of Visibility (March 31), International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May 17), and National Coming Out Day (October 11). Many trans and LGBT groups create an event or activity to mark such days, and attending one of them might help a trans older adult feel connected to a community.



## Trans Support Groups

In addition to one-time events, many local trans and LGBT groups sponsor ongoing trans support groups on a weekly or monthly basis. One way to try to locate such groups is to contact your local LGBT community center, which you can find here: [lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters](http://lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters). SAGE Centers and Affiliates ([sageusa.org](http://sageusa.org)) may also have resources for trans support groups. If you are thinking of accompanying a trans older adults to one of these meetings, try to locate the facilitator beforehand to ask about their attendance policy. Some groups greet non-trans visitors with open arms, while others are trans-only.

There are also online sources of support. If the trans older adult uses social media, do some investigating to find whatever trans support or discussion options the platform they use may have. There is also a listserv (each email goes to everyone who belongs) specifically for trans older adults age 50+, including spouses and adult children. You can find more information on ElderTG here: [forge-forward.org/resource/transgender-aging-network](http://forge-forward.org/resource/transgender-aging-network).



## Re-create Missed Events

Some trans older adults grieve the childhood and adolescence they never had, because they were forced into activities and groups that didn't fit who they were. One of the more remarkable experiences ElderTG had was the several-year period in which we engaged in TG\_Play. Participants "went back to high school" in their right gender and name and wrote many stories about their fantasy adolescences. They also built collective stories filled with a lot of high-jinks, romance, and events like proms. One couple caught each other's eye within this game, and ended up marrying in real life!

It may be possible to re-create an event a trans older adult missed, such as an overnight sleepover or a day out with the girls. Be creative!



## Get Active

Most of us would benefit from moving our bodies more. This can mean chair yoga, Tai Chi, or an exercise video, but it can also mean anything that gets us off the couch or chair, including even housework. Taking a walk—to someplace specific, while shopping, or just around the neighborhood—is good for physical, mental, and emotional fitness.



**AN ALLY CAN ENCOURAGE A TRANS OLDER ADULT TO ENGAGE WITH LIFE AND OTHER PEOPLE THROUGH CELEBRATIONS, EVENTS, AND MOVEMENT. All support positive physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.**



# Making the World Better

Supporting individual trans older adults is valuable and important. At the same time, some of the challenges trans older adults face are systemic and, if not changed, will continue to make life more difficult for trans people. Allies are critical to making these changes happen. Although some efforts require sustained public action (changing public policies, for example), others are relatively simple things that can be done during daily activities. We'll start there.



## Bring up Trans People and Topics

Some people have never (knowingly) met a trans person and carry secondhand beliefs, fears, and stereotypes about who trans people are. One of the best ways to address this problem is to simply bring the topic up. Talking about trans people or issues in a positive way invites those who hold biases to question them. Be prepared for people to excitedly respond with reports of their own trans relative or friend. These reactions reflect the stigma trans people and those around them face, and how delighted friends and family can be to finally have a safe place to share.



■ Willy, 52, Oakland, California, 2015



## Watch for and Use Opportunities to Advocate

The ways trans people can be erased or hurt are all around us. Going about your daily life, you may begin to notice some of these problems. For instance, you may be filling out a medical history at your doctor's or an application at a public benefits office and notice that there are no gender options other than "male" and "female." Bring it to someone's attention and suggest they add a category for transgender or, better yet, use a blank line for gender. Or maybe you are in a place where you notice two single-stall bathrooms, one labeled for women and one for men. Suggest that they change the signs so that anyone can use either bathroom. This practice not only cuts down the chances that a trans person will be stopped at a restroom door and told they are in the wrong place, but also benefits those stuck outside waiting for "their" bathroom to become available.



## Help Service Providers Learn More

Here's another place where starting a conversation about trans people may open an opportunity to do some critical education. When you are with a service provider, consider bringing up your work with trans older adults, protecting their identity, of course. Then ask the provider if they have had any trans clients or patients and see if they are interested in having you send them internet links to resource materials and/or trainings (see [Resources](#) section).



## Advocate for Public Policy Changes

Trans people still face discriminatory laws and public policies that are damaging. Allies can help change these. Actions can be as simple as signing a petition or as complex as organizing an effort to get new legislation passed. Some of the issues that still need doing include: Ensuring trans people have access to the appropriate restrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams; banning conversion therapy, a soul-crushing effort to change someone's gender identity or sexual orientation; and developing strong enforcement systems where non-discrimination provisions exist (and enacting non-discrimination provisions where they don't exist). Learn about policy efforts at the local and state level by connecting with your state LGBT equality group. Locate your state group through the Equality Federation found here: [equalityfederation.org](http://equalityfederation.org).



**AN ALLY SHOULD LOOK FOR AND PURSUE OPPORTUNITIES TO CHANGE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF ALL TRANS PEOPLE.**



# Conclusion

Although we've tried to make this guide comprehensive, the number of issues that can come up for any given human is endless. We are therefore ending this document with two “summary” sections. [Advice for Allies](#) synthesizes the values and actions that

are good guidelines for any ally to follow, no matter what comes up. The [Resources](#) section lists some key website resources, categorized by their primary focus. These are by no means the only resources available, but they are where we suggest you start.



■ Hank, 76, & Samm, 67, North Little Rock, Arkansas, 2015

# Advice for Allies

We have made many suggestions for how allies can help with various issues or problems that may come up, as well as ideas about how to create and celebrate joyful experiences. Here we summarize advice that should serve you in any situation.

**1. LISTEN.**

Nonjudgmental listening is both rare and a true gift. Most everything feels more bearable after someone hears our story, so don't feel like you need to "fix" anything.

**2. CHEERLEAD.**

Most of us can also use a friend who is positive and hopeful, who reassures us that we can handle the things we are facing.

**3. EMPOWER.**

Wherever possible, encourage people to make their own choices.

**4. FIND AND CONNECT TO RESOURCES.**

Many trans people spend their whole lives thinking they are "the only one." Even those who know the trans community has grown may be shocked at what's now available to them. Help them connect to what is out there.

**5. ACCOMPANY.**

Just like being listened to helps with most everything, having accompaniment can make almost any situation less scary. Consider offering to go with.

**6. ADVOCATE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL.**

Find out what the trans older adult wants you to do when you're both in public and someone disrespects them. Some people appreciate being spoken for, and others don't.

**7. ADVOCATE FOR THE COMMUNITY.**

Whenever you can, speak positively about trans people. Whenever you have the opportunity, advocate for more inclusive policies and procedures.

**8. BE OPEN TO LEARNING.**

No matter how much you know about trans people, there is more to learn. For one thing, we keep inventing new concepts and experiences.

**9. ENCOURAGE MOVEMENT.**

Literally! Most of us don't move our bodies as much as we should for optimal physical, mental, and emotional health. Create reasons to move.

**10. ENCOURAGE JOY.**

Being trans in Western society can be hard. All the more reason to create reasons to feel joy!

# Resources

## GENERAL RESOURCES

National Resource Center on LGBT Aging  
[lgbtagingcenter.org](http://lgbtagingcenter.org)

FORGE Transgender Aging Network/ElderTG  
[forge-forward.org/resource/transgender-aging-network](http://forge-forward.org/resource/transgender-aging-network)

National Center for Transgender Equality  
[transequality.org](http://transequality.org)

LGBT Community Centers (directory)  
[lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters](http://lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters)

PFLAG—Transgender  
[pflag.org/transgender](http://pflag.org/transgender)

SAGE (Advocacy and Services for LGBT Elders)  
[sageusa.org](http://sageusa.org)

Human Rights Campaign—Transgender  
[hrc.org/resources/transgender](http://hrc.org/resources/transgender)

## AGING SERVICES AND LONG-TERM CARE

Area Agencies on Aging (directory)  
[n4a.org](http://n4a.org)

Aging Services Providers with LGBT Training  
[sage.nonprofitsoapbox.com/find-a-provider](http://sage.nonprofitsoapbox.com/find-a-provider)

Long-Term Care Ombudsmen (directory)  
[theconsumervoice.org/get\\_help](http://theconsumervoice.org/get_help)

Nursing Home Residents' Rights  
[theconsumervoice.org/uploads/files/long-term-care-recipient/CV\\_NHrights\\_factsheet\\_final.pdf](http://theconsumervoice.org/uploads/files/long-term-care-recipient/CV_NHrights_factsheet_final.pdf)

Eldercare Locator (directory to local aging services)  
[olderadultcare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx](http://olderadultcare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx)

## DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE

Know Your Rights—Public Accommodations  
[transequality.org/know-your-rights/public-accommodations](http://transequality.org/know-your-rights/public-accommodations)

Know Your Rights—Survivors of Violence  
[transequality.org/know-your-rights/survivors-violence](http://transequality.org/know-your-rights/survivors-violence)

Transgender Sexual Assault Survivors' Self Help Guide to Healing and Understanding  
[forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/self-help-guide-to-healing-2015-FINAL.pdf](http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/self-help-guide-to-healing-2015-FINAL.pdf)

Safety Planning: A Guide for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals who are Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence  
[forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/safety-planning-tool.pdf](http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/safety-planning-tool.pdf)

## EMPLOYMENT/WORKPLACE ISSUES

How HR Can support Transgender Employees (for employer)  
[shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/Pages/0915-transgender-employees.aspx](http://shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/Pages/0915-transgender-employees.aspx)

A Guide to Restroom Access for Transgender Workers  
[osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA3795.pdf](http://osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA3795.pdf)

Tips for Job Searching as a Trans Person  
[thebalancecareers.com/tips-for-job-searching-as-a-trans-person-4796420](http://thebalancecareers.com/tips-for-job-searching-as-a-trans-person-4796420)

Know Your Rights—Employment  
[transequality.org/know-your-rights/employment-general](http://transequality.org/know-your-rights/employment-general)

Sexual Harassment and Trans Employees  
[forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FAQ-Sexual-Harassment-FINAL.pdf](http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FAQ-Sexual-Harassment-FINAL.pdf)

## END OF LIFE PLANNING

Creating End-of-Life Documents for Trans Individuals: An Advocate's Guide  
[lgbtagencycenter.org/resources/pdfs/End-of-Life%20PlanningArticle.pdf](https://lgbtagencycenter.org/resources/pdfs/End-of-Life%20PlanningArticle.pdf)

## HEALTH CARE PROTOCOLS

World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care  
[wpath.org/publications/soc](https://wpath.org/publications/soc)

Informed Consent (from the American Medical Association's Journal of Ethics)  
[journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/informed-consent-medical-care-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-patients/2016-11](https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/informed-consent-medical-care-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-patients/2016-11)

Comprehensive Guidelines for Care of Transgender People  
[transcare.ucsf.edu/guidelines](https://transcare.ucsf.edu/guidelines)

The Medical Care of Transgender Persons  
[lgbthealtheducation.org/publication/transgender-sod](https://lgbthealtheducation.org/publication/transgender-sod)

Practical Guidelines for Transgender Hormone Therapy  
[bumc.bu.edu/endo/clinics/transgender-medicine/guidelines](https://bumc.bu.edu/endo/clinics/transgender-medicine/guidelines)

## HEALTH INSURANCE AND APPEALS

Know Your Rights—Health Care (including challenging denials)  
[transequality.org/know-your-rights/health-care](https://transequality.org/know-your-rights/health-care)

## IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS UPDATES

Identification Change Requirements by State (National Center for Transgender Equality)  
[transequality.org/documents](https://transequality.org/documents)

## MEDICARE/MEDICAID

Know Your Rights—Medicare  
[transequality.org/know-your-rights/medicare](https://transequality.org/know-your-rights/medicare)

(Trans-Related) Medicaid Regulations and Guidance  
[transhealthproject.org/resources/medicaid-regulations-and-guidance](https://transhealthproject.org/resources/medicaid-regulations-and-guidance)

## MENTAL HEALTH

Let's Talk About It! A Transgender Survivor's Guide to Accessing Therapy  
[forge-forward.org/resource/lets-talk-about-it-a-transgender-survivors-guide-to-accessing-therapy](https://forge-forward.org/resource/lets-talk-about-it-a-transgender-survivors-guide-to-accessing-therapy)

Transgender Sexual Assault Survivors' Self Help Guide to Healing and Understanding  
[forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/self-help-guide-to-healing-2015-FINAL.pdf](https://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/self-help-guide-to-healing-2015-FINAL.pdf)

## PUBLIC BENEFIT PROGRAMS

Government Benefit Programs  
[usa.gov/benefits](https://usa.gov/benefits)

## RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

LGBT Religious Organization Resource List  
[pbs.org/independentlens/content/love-free-or-die\\_lgbt-religious-organizations-html](https://pbs.org/independentlens/content/love-free-or-die_lgbt-religious-organizations-html)

## VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

Veterans Health Administration Care for Transgender Persons  
[transequality.org/issues/resources/veterans-health-administration-care-for-transgender-veterans](https://transequality.org/issues/resources/veterans-health-administration-care-for-transgender-veterans)

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