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[Market widens for gay Baby Boomers seeking a comfortable place to grow old](#)

- [Rona Marech, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Virginia will share iced tea with neighbors at her low-income senior housing complex just outside Sonoma. They'll admire each other's roses or chat on their patios during the summer. But the socializing only goes so far. Virginia has not told a soul that she's a lesbian -- and she doesn't plan to.

"I only came out in my 50s. I was fairly open and out. Now I'll be 75 in February, and I find myself going back in again, which is a little distressing," she said. "I never would have thought 10 years ago that I would have retreated, so to speak. But sometimes, it doesn't seem to be safe."

Even in the Bay Area, gay, lesbian and transgender seniors frequently express similar worries about whether they will be able to age with dignity in a housing community that's respectful of their pasts, partners and stories. Those concerns have long fueled dreams -- almost since a gay movement first emerged in this country -- of building some place where the gay community could peacefully grow old. Now, after decades of snubs and false starts, the need and the market have happily collided, and gay elder communities have quietly begun to spring up internationally and around the country, in states from Florida to Arizona, North Carolina and California.

"The field is reaching a critical mass," said Gerard Koskovich of the Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network, a constituent group of the American Society on Aging. "There's been more sophisticated market research and probably just a change in attitude. ... With the aging of Baby Boomers, people can more realistically imagine that there will be a market for this housing."

He counted at least four gay senior developments in the United States, three more that are under construction and 18 others that are in some state of pre-development. The housing in question runs the gamut from glitzy "resort- retirement communities" for active seniors

to mobile home parks to nonprofit outfits that offer affordable housing and health services.

In California, the nonprofit Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing is about to break ground in Hollywood on an \$18.6 million building that will have 104 affordable apartments and a community center. Locally, two organizations, Openhouse and Our Town, are knee-deep in efforts to get their projects in the ground. In Daly City, OurPlace, a small residential care facility for gay men, has been licensed since 1999.

These places do not violate state nondiscrimination laws because they are open to anyone who wishes to be in a gay-friendly environment.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates -- very roughly -- that there are more than 3 million gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans over 65, a figure they say will grow by a million in the next 25 years. San Francisco's Department of Aging and Adult Services loosely puts the figure of gay and lesbian seniors in the city at around 17,000.

Michael Gibson can accommodate a grand total of five of them at OurPlace. He and his partner decided to convert their china blue Daly City house into an assisted living home for seniors after visiting a gay friend at a senior home. "He told them about the tragic death of his wife and son in a car accident," Gibson said. "It was all made up."

Dismayed, he moved out his friend and set about opening a facility where gay men wouldn't have to lie. Residents at the home -- which costs \$4,000 a month -- hang photographs of their partners in their rooms and choose videos from a collection that includes gay-themed movies like "The Birdcage." Gibson says his is the first such facility in the country.

The boom that followed is partly explained by a maturation in the community, said Marcy Adelman, a founder of Openhouse and a psychiatrist who has studied aging in the gay population. "We were a young community," she said. "We weren't thinking of ourselves as intergenerational."

To demonstrate the need for gay senior housing in the Bay Area, Adelman and San Francisco State University Professor Brian DeVries conducted a study of 1,300 gay seniors. The results, which will be published in July, show that gays and their straight counterparts have similar average retirement incomes: 42 percent of study participants 60 or older had annual incomes less than \$39,000; 19 percent had less than \$26,000. Gays and lesbians are more likely to be childless and single and to live alone than heterosexuals, the study also found, factors that increase their vulnerability as they age.

Adelman and other advocates also argue that in traditional housing, this population often receives inadequate support and services. Nancy Flaxman, a social worker recently hired by Openhouse, suggested that 99.9 percent of gay seniors in mainstream housing are in the closet.

"The basic issue is that LGBT seniors grew up and came of age at a time when to be gay or lesbian was considered a crime and a mental illness," said Flaxman, who spent 11 years working with gay seniors in Marin. "As a result, they are reluctant to talk about their pasts, which isolates them and in turn compromises the quality of care."

Some facilities do not allow same-sex couples to live together, and even when such arrangements are permitted, many gay couples worry they will be mistreated by staff and peers if they openly acknowledge their relationships.

That mistrust runs deep. On a recent afternoon, an OurPlace resident, an 85-year-old with glasses and thinning white hair, looked up from the television to talk, but panicked at the line of questioning.

"Did they put me here because they thought I was gay?" he said.

"Honey, we all know you're gay, for 50 years," Gibson said.

"Just because you're roommates with a guy doesn't mean you're gay," he responded, before turning away. "I don't like this conversation."

Though gay acceptance is rising and Baby Boomers are more likely to be openly gay in old age, the desire for gay senior housing won't disappear, Adelman said. Seniors tend to cluster with like-minded people -- most senior housing in this country is faith-based -- and gay men and lesbians are no different, she said.

Dana Finnegan and Emily McNally will readily confirm that. They live in a 55-plus lesbian community -- a development of manufactured homes and recreational vehicles -- on the west coast of Florida. "I can be who I am," said Finnegan, 72, a retired therapist. "We can walk down the street holding hands and don't have to worry about homophobia."

That's the sort of environment Openhouse -- formerly called Rainbow Adult Community Housing -- hopes to cultivate. The nonprofit organization, founded in 1998, has so far raised \$1 million of the \$150 million needed for construction of a 310-unit building that will offer up to 100 affordable apartments. Their plans call for housing seniors in various stages of health and offering services to nonresidents.

Openhouse is angling to build on two parcels of land along San Francisco's new Octavia

Boulevard -- though they'll face tough competition for the coveted location near the Castro. "One of the challenges for Openhouse is that it hasn't previously developed anything," said Supervisor Bevan Dufty, a supporter. "There are lots of issues and nuances ... but I think that Openhouse is going to happen."

The other local project, Our Town, has been in the works for eight years, but Peter Lundberg, the corporate financial planner and consultant behind the plan, is struggling to secure financing and land. He has looked for property in the North Bay and the East Bay, but prices are so steep he'll probably take his project -- a retirement resort with market-rate units, a dining room, spa and retail space -- to Southern California or another state.

Even if all of the many projects under way are completed, Koskovich pointed out, they can accommodate only a tiny fraction of the gay senior population. The larger if less glamorous issue is how to make all senior facilities sensitive to their gay residents, he said.

In the meantime, gay seniors tap their feet expectantly and the waiting lists grow ever longer -- in some cases before the first shovel hits the ground.

Virginia, the senior living in Sonoma, said she used to think she wanted to age in a mixed community, but with each passing year, the idea of a gay senior home holds more appeal. "It's the fact that you don't have to be on guard all the time," she said. "You can only take a friendship so far when you're hiding a part of yourself."

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