

2020 REPORT

# HOUSING FOR LGBT+ OLDER ADULTS IN PUERTO RICO

**CENTRO  
COMUNITARIO**  
PARA EL  
ADULTO MAYOR **LGBT+**



ReconstruyeQ, 2018.  
Toa Alta, P.R.

1ST EDITION

# HOUSING REPORT FOR **LGBT+** OLDER ADULTS IN PR

Prepared by Kiaranel Castro Lebrón  
Program Coordinator

Approved by Wilfred W. Labiosa  
CEO and President

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In the last years, Puerto Rico has been impacted by the worst economic panorama, including hurricanes (2017), earthquakes (2019-2020), and health pandemics (not just COVID-19); our people are resilient. These health, financial, and atmospheric events have impacted access and availability of mental and physical health services. The lack of housing, increased LGBT phobias, ageism, racism, classism, xenophobia, and so many other social and cultural challenges have aggravated our living conditions in Puerto Rico.

Although Waves Ahead and SAGE Puerto Rico, from our two Community Centers, continue providing education to service providers focused on elders and the community-at-large and provide ongoing mental health and case management supports for LGBT+ elders, it is not enough.

Every time that I speak to our participants, they repeat over and over again the need for a safe housing unit where they can live (and retire) in peace and free of LGBT phobias, separatism, and ostracism, a space that they can call home and where equality reigns. They have to face so much out in the community, but they seek (and need), at least, a living space where they can live peacefully. For these reasons, it is relevant to create multiple housing units, of all kinds, across the country. Up until now, there is NOT such a program.

We are doing everything we can to create the first of many housing programs in Puerto Rico focused on LGBT+ older adults. We need your support to further educate of such a need. This pamphlet provides you with some information on our goals and our work. I invite you to visit our Centers, contact us, and donate. Every step takes us closer to our mission, but we need all of you.

In Solidarity,



**Wilfred W. Labiosa**, PhD  
CEO and President  
Waves Ahead Corp.  
[wilfred@wavesahead.org](mailto:wilfred@wavesahead.org)

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## ABOUT US

**Waves Ahead Corp.** was registered as a non-profit organization in Puerto Rico in 2017. Waves Ahead offer psychosocial services focused on LGBT+ Older Adults.

Our first and primary Community Center for LGBT+ Older Adults is located in Américo Miranda Avenue #1149 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Our second community center is located in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, and we are looking forward to opening various centers around Puerto Rico.

Waves Ahead is shaped by several programs described below:

- **SAGE Puerto Rico:** Focused on providing individual, couple, and family therapy and support. It also offers educational workshops, support groups, yoga sessions, music therapy, among other psychosocial activities, given by professionals in Clinical Psychology and Clinical Social Work.



- **Descúbrete:** A program focused on providing training to entrepreneurship and business management to the LGBT+ population, Women, and Older Adults that want to start their business.
- **ReconstruyeQ:** This program arose after the devastation caused by the hurricanes in 2017. ReconstruyeQ offers support by donating food, drinking water, basic necessities, water filters, generators, and the reconstruction of houses. The program continues to assist those impacted by the earthquakes (2020) and has recently implemented a food sustainability initiative.
- **Empodérate:** A program in its development stages that will focus on advocacy at municipal and central government levels, train future movement leaders, work with public policy, and provide education on various subjects to a wide range of institutions, government, and beyond.

As the director of mental health services of SAGE Puerto Rico, I hear over time the need for housing and mental health services.

Currently, the population in Puerto Rico is aging and becoming older. A significant number of these elders do not have access to economic resources, enough supports, nor specific medical services that take into consideration gender diversity nor sexual orientations. Furthermore, there has been an increase in suicidal ideations and deaths from suicide in the last five years among LGBT+ adults over 50. For this reason, it is more than relevant to create projects and programs focused on providing a wide array of services to this aging population.

There is a current need for mental health services and housing aimed at the LGBT+ elder population in Puerto Rico. We have indeed identified a relationship between mental health and homelessness in older LGBT+ adults. Facing the possibility of not having a safe home can substantially affect mental health, decrease biopsychosocial functioning, and deteriorate their quality of life. Besides, not having access to safe housing can generate mental health situations, problems, and disorders. Therefore, at Waves Ahead and SAGE Puerto Rico, we are working so that our older LGBT+ adults can have access to inclusive, safe, and dignified housing opportunities under human rights and self-autonomy.

Following, you will find a compendium of our work, sustaining the importance and relationship between mental health and housing. We hope you decide to be part of our journey by supporting our services.

Cordially,



**Seil Román**, MSW  
Director of Mental Health  
Waves Ahead Corp.  
seil@wavesahead.org

## HOUSING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND OTHER SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

Factors beyond biology determine the health of individuals, communities, and populations. Barton and Grant (2006) developed a map of social determinants of health. They illustrate how the different environments in which people are born, grow, learn, and work affects health behaviors, lifestyles, decision-making, and the well-being of each person. These environments transform into neighborhoods and communities as spaces for health promotion or, on the contrary, areas that can be harmful to health (Biddle & Seymour, 2012).

Evidence demonstrates how health can be harmed by homelessness or by living in poor quality conditions. Housing as a "home" is not only a physical refuge but the heart of psychological, social, and cultural well-being (Garnham & Rolfe, 2019).

SAGE PR is an organization that offers support services to LGBT+ Older Adults. It is well known by most that this population has lived through years of discrimination, stigmatization, and prejudice, which in turn have resulted in increased risks of depression, disability, chronic disease, social isolation, poor diet, among other concerning consequences.

Heightening these considerations, LGBT+ older adults have been identified as facing

larger risks in housing discrimination when trying to rent or buy a home, which puts this population at greater risk for health problems in general. Sydney Kopp-Richardson, SAGE's National LGBT Elder Housing Initiative Director, affirms that "while movement building has opened opportunities and created greater social acceptance for our communities, LGBT elders are still impacted by decades of oppression, which may disrupt connection to families of origin, living wage earnings, access to wealth accumulation, and opportunities to age in social and economic security."



Currently, there are no housing projects for LGBT+ older adults in Puerto Rico. Our SAGE Puerto Rico team has identified the need for housing, which is why we have been working on data collection activities. This data helps us understand the characteristics, conditions, and specifications that a house and a community must have to be safe and welcoming for LGBT+ Older Adults.

## OUR JOURNEY COLLECTING DATA

In [January 2018](#), shortly after hurricanes Irma and María devastated Puerto Rico, we decided to administer questionnaires related to housing necessities in a traditional festival called Claridad. Tough times came upon us after the hurricanes, and we focused on rebuilding homes for those who were not approved to receive funds for rebuilding. As of [December 2020](#), we had rebuilt 21 houses in 9 municipalities.

In [March 2019](#), we held a focus group session and administered questionnaires once again.

In [November 2019](#), we sat down to plan the beginnings of a housing project for **LGBT + Older Adults in Puerto Rico**. To start, we considered it essential to know the neighborhood where the project could be built. We wanted to get to know the neighbors and dig into how safe and welcoming they would be to receive LGBT+ Older Adults.

- The neighbors were invited to a focus group session which would be celebrated in [December 2019](#). In this session, we wanted to talk about the neighborhood, its residents, and their perception regarding the LGBT+ population and elderly population.



A questionnaire was developed to collect sociodemographic information and interests for community encounters. As a result, we got to fill one questionnaire.

- As [December 2019](#) went by, we visited the community twice, in which we achieved three questionnaires through door knocking.
- At the end of [December 2019](#), we decided to visit the community for the third time and leave letters, envelopes, and questionnaires in the neighborhoods' mailboxes, inviting them to fill them out and send them back to us. Up until today, we have not received any questionnaires.
- In [January 2019](#), we thought it was time to restructure the methodology, so we decided to interview members of the LGBT+ elderly community. We also conducted a Secondary Data Analysis of a focus group and questionnaire administered in March 2019.

**Figure 1.** The TimeLine below reflects the different efforts completed until 2020.





## WHAT WE FOUND

There is a close relationship between access to secure tenure and a favorable state of health, and conversely, between homelessness and a deteriorated state of health. Beyond being a physical refuge, housing is the space where intimacies are cultivated and where psychological and emotional health is strengthened.

"We know that one of the most telling predictors of wellness, safety, and a sense of belonging lies in housing—housing that allows all LGBT people to age with dignity in myriad ways" (Sydney Kopp-Richardson, 2020). Therefore, the need for the development of safe and affordable housing has become evident. The demographic and climatic changes, the realities and circumstances of the people, and the results of natural events such as the hurricanes Irma and María in 2017 make housing a social determinant of health for LGBT+ Older Adults in Puerto Rico that needs to be addressed.

Consequently, the improvement in living conditions can save lives, prevent diseases, improve quality of life, reduce poverty, help mitigate climate change and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (WHO, 2018).

The Equal Rights Center in Washington, D.C., conducted a study that found that 48% of



same-sex elderly couples looking to rent a home face discrimination (2014), as cited by Movement Advancement Project & Sage (2017).

Globally, many people live in fear that they are denied a place to live, merely for the fact of being who they are.

Biddle and Seymour (2012) say that health-promoting communities and neighborhoods require developing a supportive environment in which both physical and social issues are considered. Accordingly, there is a need to address psychosocial effects, particularly those related to housing or neighborhood deprivation due to sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination.

Some authors suggest that the increase in support networks, individual and collective empowerment, and the reduction of social isolation and exclusion are determinants to achieve better states of health and reduce inequalities.

**The literature review and the situational analysis in Puerto Rico evidence that:**

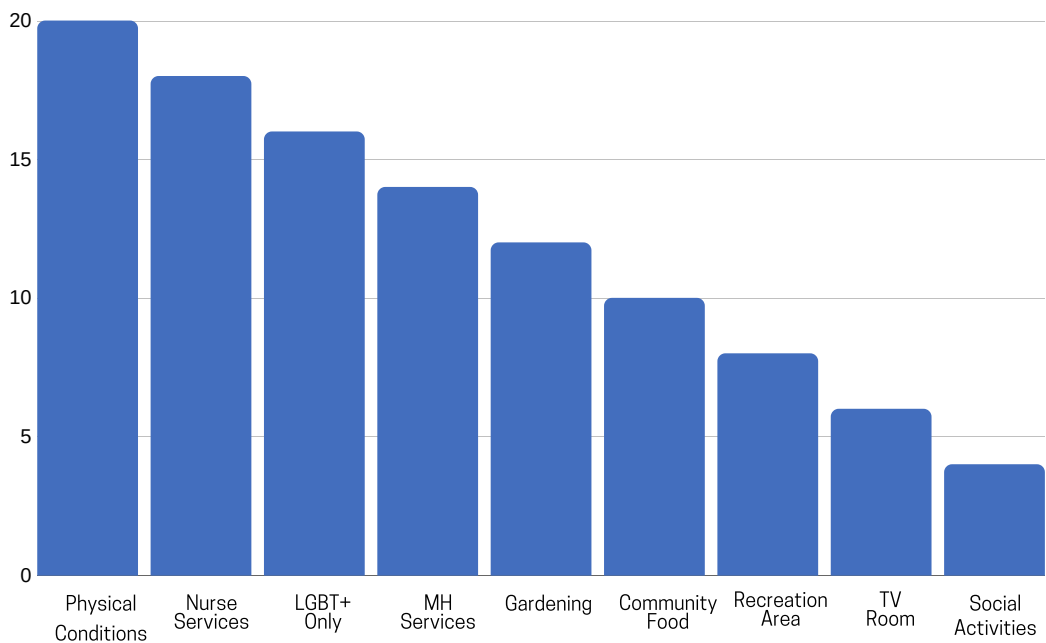
- We live in a society that openly discriminates against the elderly population and the LGBT+ population.
- LGBT+ Older Adults are concerned about architectural barriers, physical and mental health services, and social integration among community members.
- Other valued concerns include home security, community security, transportation and, affordability.

The chart below represents the perception of the participants who attended the Focal Group hosted by Waves Ahead and SAGE PR in March 2019.

During this encounter, the participants filled a questionnaire that asked about what they considered a priority in housing. The participants consider physical conditions such as, for example, accessibility to wheelchairs a priority.

They also consider essential physical and mental health services. It is particularly striking that most of the participants prefer having a residential community exclusively for LGBT+ people. This may be due to, as presented before, the rejection and discrimination experienced.

**An LGBT+ elder housing project must promote security, protection, privacy and contribute to the well-being of each one of the people who inhabit it.**





## NEXT STEPS



- Resume meetings concerning collaborative agreements. \*Due to COVID-19, many meetings had to be canceled and postponed.
- Finalize collaborative agreements with agencies willing to support housing projects' construction, development, implementation, and effective functioning.
- Engage in community outreach to build up support networks with different sectors in different municipalities of Puerto Rico.
- Identify funding sources for the housing projects. Although similar programs that are being implemented in the continental U.S. can have access to a list of support programs, in Puerto Rico, you will note we are very limited. \*Refer to page 13 to see a list of federal programs available in the United States compared to Puerto Rico.
- Start the construction and enhancement of the properties destined to be LGBT-elderly homes.
- Open inclusive and supportive homes in different communities around Puerto Rico.



Left - Lorraine A. Cortés-Vázquez, Commissioner of the Department for the Aging, NYC  
Right - Chirlane McCray, First Lady of New York City.

## FEDERAL PROGRAMS AVAILABILITY COMPARISON

### CONTINENTAL U.S.

- ✓ Low Income Housing Tax Credits
- ✓ Tenant-based rental assistance programs
- ✓ Project-based rental assistance programs
- ✓ Public housing operating fund and capital fund
- ✓ Choice Neighborhoods
- ✓ HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME)
- ✓ Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)
- ✓ National Housing Trust Fund
- ✓ Capital Magnet Fund
- ✓ Rural Housing Service programs
- ✓ Qualified Opportunity Zone Designations

### PUERTO RICO

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**Note:** If you or someone you know wants to live in one of our upcoming housing units focused on LGBT elders, please contact us, as information may vary due to different considerations.

On the previous page, you can compare the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico concerning federal programs for affordable housing. As you notice, there is a broad difference in terms of availability concerning housing for the Puerto Rican population. Out of 11 federal programs listed, only four are available, and three are partially available in Puerto Rico. This means we need to advocate on behalf of policies that include support for housing, specifically for our elder population.

Populations worldwide are aging rapidly, and Puerto Rico is no exception. The data contained in the American Community Survey (2019) shows that 27% of Puerto Rico's residents are 60 years or older, which represents a substantial segment of our population. Therefore, ensuring a safe, functional, and healthy living space for our elder adults in Puerto Rico must be a priority.

Developing housing projects can provide many benefits for LGBT+ older adults, including the distribution of household responsibilities and being part of a lovable and inclusive community.

This would also reduce social isolation, depression, anxiety, deaths from suicide, and even deaths from accidents, which is one of the leading causes of death among elderly adults, amid many other benefits.

Having a healthy home has a direct impact on people's physical and emotional health. It can result in a long and healthy life at an old age, full of new experiences shared among a large community. This is what we aspire to at Waves Ahead and SAGE PR! To create inclusive, safe, comfortable, and functional spaces for our LGBT+ older adults and to provide a quality, durable, affordable space that they can call home.

We are sure that with your support, we'll be able to identify what is needed to successfully build socially and structurally safe homes for our LGBT+ elder adults. I invite you to visit our website, get to know our work, and decide to support our organization and projects. We'll keep working to grow our family, and we hope you decide to be a part of it.



**Kiaranel Castro Lebrón**, MPHE  
Descúbrete Program Coordinator  
Waves Ahead Corp.  
[descubrete@wavesahead.org](mailto:descubrete@wavesahead.org)

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Waves Ahead & SAGE PR Official Website. URL: <https://wavesahead.org/>



# CONTACT US

## **SAN JUAN**

1149 Ave Américo Miranda San Juan, PR 00921

[waves@wavesahead.org](mailto:waves@wavesahead.org)

787.940.8851



## **CABO ROJO**

Mestre and Baldorioty Street Corner  
Old Recycling and Environmental Health Center  
Cabo Rojo, PR 00623

[waves@wavesahead.org](mailto:waves@wavesahead.org). | [caborojo@wavesahead.org](mailto:caborojo@wavesahead.org)  
787.940.8851

**Visit our website for more information:**

<https://wavesahead.org/>

