

LGBT community's health needs examined

Written by Victoria Pelham The Desert Sun

Jan 29

mydesert.com

Tom Swann, a gay 54-year-old Marine Corps veteran, activist, and a resident of Rancho Mirage, called himself the “last of the Mohicans.”

He is one of the few AIDS patients who suffered through CMV retinitis in the 1990s and survived it, he said. But he’s now blind, a result of the virus. He can’t leave the house, grocery shop, or wash clothes. He can’t see when things fall on the floor or electric cords get in his way. And his dentist is more than an hour away in San Bernardino.

Swann lives alone and has a caregiver from the Desert AIDS Project for nine hours each week. But he said he could use more help.

“Being blind is difficult. I live alone. I get depressed,” Swann said.

The Coachella Valley has a high percentage of LGBT residents in comparison with the rest of the country, with Palm Springs ranked in the most recent census as having the third-highest population of same-sex households in the nation. But in a city with an openly gay mayor and three out of five city council members openly gay, little is known about the health of the community.

The LGBT Community Center of the Desert hopes to learn more about the health care needs of valley LGBT residents this fall with a first-of-its-kind survey that will be conducted over the next four months. The information the survey will provide will be used to identify gaps in health care and could help to provide funding to the Desert AIDS Project and AIDS Assistance Program, for example, that require specific data benchmarks.

Made possible through a \$69,138 grant from the Desert Healthcare District and conducted by the Health Assessment Resource Center, the LGBT Center began considering the assessment two years ago when denied for funding that required community health statistics, according to the program’s project manager.

“It’s going to give us a very scientific way, a very researched, evidence-based way of identifying the needs of the LGBT community,” said Jill Gover, the center’s director of counseling. “The whole idea is that when it’s research-based, then it gives it a certain amount of credibility.”

She said this data would show comprehensively what programs the valley’s LGBT community needs.

“We have an unusual demographic here in Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley, and we don’t know whether the norms nationally will be reflected here or whether there will be some interesting anomalies here,” Gover said.

She said issues that could show up in the survey include transportation difficulties and isolation among LGBT seniors, as well as depression and a lack of access to care.

Nationally, the LGBT population faces high rates of tobacco, alcohol and other drug abuse, as well as LGBT youth who are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide, increased risk of HIV and other STDs among gay men, and difficulty accessing health care among seniors, according to Healthy People 2020, a Health and Human Services initiative.

Transgender communities often struggle with additional health concerns such as mental health issues, suicide,

increased risk of HIV/STDs, and higher rates of uninsured people than their lesbian, gay and bisexual counterparts.

“(Transgender residents) are few in numbers; their needs are great, and their needs are very different from the rest of the LGBT community,” Gover said.

“We’re unique in that we are in a large LGBT community, but we’re also in a retirement community,” said David Brinkman, CEO of the Desert AIDS Project, who the center has interviewed for its survey.

He said many of the people faced open discrimination — even from family and friends — as a result of their sexual orientation, so they are going back into the closet upon needing health aid in retirement communities and nursing homes.

“They do not have close family members to take care of them,” Brinkman said, adding that many of them didn’t have children. “This generation didn’t find a home in their church; they also don’t have that community to look after them. That creates a situation where you have depression, you have alcoholism and other things that relate to isolation.”

Swann said there must be other LGBT residents in the city out there like him, and it’s important to learn more about them so they can get the help they need. He said he’s very happy with the survey efforts, and it’s important to for them to conduct a survey like this.

“We need these statistics,” Swann said. “We need to understand our community so we can serve it better.”

The grant, which was approved in October, fulfills the same needs as other community health surveys — finding unmet health needs and disparities and addressing them, said Eileen Packer, CEO of the Health Assessment Resource Center, who has been working with the LGBT Center.

“This is wonderful,” Packer said.

She added that “the sensitivity of our health care professionals for the LGBT community — finding someone who understands what their needs are” could be an issue.

Gover said each portion of the population has unique needs.

Gover said she hopes as many people as possible will complete the survey, which will be available in both print and online, and that the diverse LGBT population in the valley will be represented, so the center can use the information to improve services and programming to meet everyone’s needs. She also said she hopes the survey information will open the door to future funding.

“We’re waiting to see what this yields, and we hope that based on the data, Desert Healthcare will be able to help us in the future as well as other kinds of funding services that need this data to move forward,” she said.

Glen Grayman, president of the board of directors for the Desert Healthcare District, said the agency had approved the grant because this LGBT-specific survey had never been done before in the valley.

He said that, although HARC had asked the sexual orientation of its respondents in each survey, with 9.1 percent identifying as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning) in East Riverside County in 2010, “We don’t know anything about them.”

The district’s CEO, Kathy Greco, agreed.

“You cannot address something if you don’t understand it,” she said. “This is a really great opportunity and

Greco said this survey will be valuable for the LGBT population but also the community as a whole.

“The impact (of the assessment) would be to develop the most appropriate services and programs to support this target population within this community,” she said. “We want to make sure we are helping develop the most effective, efficient and appropriate health and wellness services for all residents of the district.”

The assessment will be conducted through a snowballing effect, which has just begun with six knowledgeable sources and will move to focus groups, then the survey by May. The results are expected by August or September, she said.

The sources and focus groups, chosen from board officials and others from the center and throughout the valley familiar with LGBT and health issues, will help to choose the themes and questions presented in the survey, but Gover said she couldn't say what exactly will be addressed in the questions yet.

“It's important to hear from the community directly,” Gover said.