

Rainbow Seniors in Long Term Care

COVID was a cruel reminder that Ontario's eldercare system is unresponsive to the rights and the particular care needs, concerns, and social and emotional well-being of older adults who are 2-Spirit, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (2SLGBTQI+). Pandemic life was particularly hard on Rainbow Seniors who were in long-term care (LTC) where they were at a heightened risk of social isolation, neglect and loneliness. Many were estranged from biological family members, relying on their own care networks for support. When Ontario's stay-at-home mandates forced LTC facilities into lockdown, some institutions refused to acknowledge chosen family members, only allowing visits from "blood relatives and Power of Attorney." Rainbow LTC residents who feared that being out in an institutional community would expose them to unsafe and unkind care were doubly alone and isolated during COVID.

Western culture is built on colonial systems that rely on religious and pseudo-scientific beliefs that deny the existence of gender and sexual diversity. As such, heterosexual and cisgendered people are privileged and continuously acknowledged in Western societies. Canada's LTC facilities are institutions that retain aspects of the colonial system that gave birth to them, placing value on heteronormative ideologies of sex, gender, and sexuality. It is no surprise, then, to learn that LTC care-providers routinely assume that all older adults are cisgendered and heterosexual, exacerbating systemic inequalities that ignore gender diversity and sexual expression within eldercare.

In 2022 the City of Toronto launched Leading & Learning with Pride, a tool kit for LTC co-created with Rainbow Seniors. This was an important step toward institutional education and positive change, yet the tool kit has only been formally implemented in ten facilities in one Canadian city. The revised



Residents Bill of Rights adopted under Ontario's new 2021 Fixing Long Term Care Act now includes sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, but more community-connected research and a broad 2SLGBTQI+ educational effort is needed in care homes across Ontario and beyond. LTC residents reflect the diversity of Canada's population, including 2SLGBTQI+ older adults. LTC homes must respect this diversity in the care and services provided to their residents.

Certainly, the pandemic emphasized the deficits in Ontario's LTC system for Rainbow Seniors. But these people belong to the community with a dazzling history of activism and support. Coming together in a coalition to combat the injustices they saw happening in LTC during the pandemic, Ontario organizations who serve Rainbow seniors and advocate to improve their lives spoke up to government, worked with the media and participated in public forums. We acknowledge their invaluable work:

- Senior Pride Network Toronto
- Aging with Pride Waterloo-Wellington
- Ottawa Senior Pride Network / Réseau fierté des aînés d'Ottawa
- Senior Pride Network Niagara
- Windsor Pride Community
- Rainbow Faith and Freedom
- New Horizons 2S-LGBTQ+ Seniors Program North Bay

