

**LESBIANS AND AGEING**

**Housing and Services for Senior Lesbians**

1996 Needs Assessment Survey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(The entire document may be  
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Project sponsored by

*Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society*

Respondents ranged in age from younger lesbians in their 20s to an older lesbian in her 70s. The survey asked respondents to place themselves in one of several age categories (see chart below): 9% were in the 21-30 age group, 19% were aged 31-40 years, almost half (46%) were in the 41 to 50 age group, 21% were aged 51-60 years, and 4% and 1% were in the 61-70 and 71-80 age groups respectively. Of those who responded, none were in the under-20 or over-80 age groups. One respondent did not provide her age.

*Age*

This document was scanned and written to .pdf by C. Gregory

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Visit <http://vlscs.ca> for more information .

## *Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society*

In December 1994, several Victoria lesbians met together over their shared interest in the future housing needs of senior lesbians, and created the beginnings of what has since evolved into the Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society (VLSCS). Over the past two years, VLSCS has focused on clarifying its purpose and objectives, creating awareness of the Society in the lesbian community, obtaining legal Society status, and organizing activities to raise funds and increase membership.

### *Purpose*

To enable senior lesbians to live active and meaningful lives through the establishment of housing with various levels of support and a community network

### *Objectives*

- ◊ establish a support network for lesbian seniors who choose to stay in their own home or in existing care
- ◊ empower older lesbians to make their own decisions and contributions in all areas of their lives
- ◊ buy, build or otherwise obtain a building in which to provide residential support for senior lesbians
- ◊ provide support for senior lesbians, at varying levels, including personal care

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Survey designed and conducted by the Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society  
Spring 1996

Report authored by Helen Durie, December 1996

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*Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society*

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***Table of Contents***

Executive Summary	<i>i</i>
Lesbian Needs Assessment Survey	1
Who Responded	1
Age	1
Where Do Respondents Live?	2
Important Ageing Issues	3
Financial Security	4
Health	4
Affordable Housing	4
Employment	4
Isolation/Loneliness	4
Transportation	4
Primary Caregiver	5
Personal Safety	5
Fear of Death and Dying	5
Other Concerns	5
Housing Preferences	6
Lesbian Housing	9
Current Health Problems	11
Sources of Emotional Support	12
Community Support Services	13
Discrimination	14
Discrimination and Age	14
Effects of Discrimination	16
Emotional Effects	16
Physical Safety and Integrity	17
Employment and Financial Security	17
Remaining in the Closet	17

Sexuality	18
Loss of Family and Friends	18
Political Activism	18
Health	18
Internalized Homophobia	19
Personal Life	19
Services Needed in the Future	20
Services Proposed for VLSCS	21
Inclusiveness/Consultation	21
Age Inclusiveness	22
Queers, Transsexuals and Gay Men	23
Housing	23
Other Housing Themes	25
Home Support Services	25
Caregiver Support	26
Health/Wellness	26
Social/Recreational Activities	26
Support Services	27
Lesbian Information Resource	29
Lesbian Education Resource	29
Advocacy	30
Spiritual	30
Sharing Resources	30
Older/Younger Lesbians	31
Research	31
Public Education/Information	32
Future Directions for VLSCS	33
Housing Services	34
Lesbian Community Housing	34
Home Support Services	35
Housing Information Network	35

Appendix      Needs Assessment Survey for all Lesbians

*LESBIANS AND AGEING*  
*Housing and Services for Senior Lesbians*

*Helen Durie*  
December 1996

*Executive Summary*

In Spring 1996, the Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society (VLSCS) conducted a survey to obtain the views of lesbians on housing and other services that they would like to have available in their senior years. Approximately 450 surveys were distributed, through the local *LesbianaNews* and various women's and lesbian venues and events, and 81 were returned.

*Who Responded?*

Respondents ranged in age from younger lesbians in their 20s to an older lesbian in her 70s. Almost half were in their 40s, with the remainder falling fairly evenly in younger and older age groups. Of just over half who provided their name and address, the great majority lived in the Victoria area, several lived within an hour or so's drive, and the remainder lived in more distant areas of Vancouver Island on one of the Gulf Islands. No other personally identifying information was sought.

*Important Ageing Issues*

Lesbians were asked to identify issues that could affect them personally as they aged, from a list provided. Financial security and health were the most commonly-reported aging issues, with over two-thirds of lesbians indicating that income, pensions, health issues, and the impact of government cutbacks on health services were of concern. Lack of affordable housing was the next most frequently identified issue. Other concerns included difficulties in obtaining employment, the availability of job training programs, the impact of technological advances, isolation and loneliness, and being a primary caregiver. Concerns that were less broadly shared included abuse, crime, fraud and exploitation, and fear of death and dying. Ageing issues volunteered by respondents included lack of family support, lack of places to meet older lesbians, fear of becoming incapacitated, homophobia and its effects on social attitudes and services for lesbians, inadequate mental health and social services, homelessness, and global conflict and environmental destruction.

### ***Housing Preferences***

Respondents were asked to separately rate seven housing options on a 5-point scale, from 'very positive' to 'very negative'. Options included a lesbian only retirement community, a women only retirement community, a heterosexual retirement community, a lesbian only nursing home, a women only nursing home, a heterosexual nursing home, and lesbian community housing. Respondents were not asked to indicate which of the seven options they most preferred, but this could be reasonably inferred by examining which options received the most favourable ratings.

Respondents clearly favoured the lesbian-only options. Lesbian community housing received the highest proportion of positive ratings, followed by a lesbian-only retirement community, and a lesbian-only nursing home. Women-only housing was a second choice after lesbian only housing, while heterosexual housing was clearly not a preferred housing option.

### ***Current Health Problems***

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had health problems that could affect their quality of life, and thirty-nine responded in the affirmative.

The most commonly reported physical health problems were arthritis, myalgic encephalomyelitis (chronic fatigue syndrome), and asthma, and spinal and joint problems. Others mentioned were multiple sclerosis, cardiac problems, allergies and food intolerances, diabetes, epilepsy, hepatitis, liver sclerosis, multiple chemical sensitivity/environmental illness, pancreatitis, and sciatica. A range of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, manic-depressive and schizophrenia were also reported.

### ***Sources of Emotional Support***

Lesbians reported a friend or lover as the most likely source of emotional help, with therapists being the next most likely source, followed by a family member. Very few would turn to a religious counsellor or a crisis line.

### ***Community Support Services***

Respondents were asked whether they would make use of a number of specified services if they were available.

Almost without exception, respondents indicated that they would make use of a community centre, and avail themselves of social activities. Almost all would also

like to have services which enable them to remain in their own homes, and have access to a day care program for those in need of daily assistance, as a relief to caregivers. Less interest was apparent in the need for a lesbian crisis line.

### ***Discrimination***

Respondents were asked whether they had experienced discrimination in a number of public and private areas of life. Discrimination in personal and social life was reported most frequently, followed by employment, including partner benefits. Other areas included health services, housing, legal services, and religious, financial and insurance institutions. Younger respondents were more likely to report discrimination.

### ***Effects of Discrimination***

Respondents attested to the heavy toll that discrimination takes on their lives - personally, financially, emotionally, health-wise, etc., and how it limits many from experiencing, or even reaching for, their full potential.

The effects of discrimination included a wide range of emotional effects, threats to physical safety and integrity, loss of employment, loss of family and friends, remaining in the closet, and internalized homophobia. A number of respondents reported that discrimination had been a catalyst to political activism.

### ***Services Proposed for VLSCS***

Lesbians were asked to suggest services that VLSCS could provide to benefit the lesbian community. Half of those who responded recommended housing-related services and activities, ranging from the development and administration of a multi-stage senior housing project to an agency to assist in locating affordable housing. Other common themes were support services to enable lesbians to remain in their own home as long as possible, and a lesbian activities centre. Most of the remaining suggestions related to advocacy, information resources, education, and research. A number of respondents emphasized the need for services which brought younger and older lesbians together. Others spoke to the need for services which were welcoming of racial and identity diversity, and the importance of consultation.

There are already a number of ongoing services and activities for lesbians in Victoria. However, the range of proposals elicited by the survey is an indication of ways in which the community has yet to develop, especially in providing for the needs of ageing lesbians. Some support is already being provided - in some cases