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February 26, 2014

Senator Bert Stedman  
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee  
State Capitol, Room 30  
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: SB 131 – An act prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity or expression (Sen. Berta Gardner, Sponsor)

Dear Sen. Stedman,

AARP Alaska offers our appreciation to you and the members of the Senate HSS Committee for consideration of SB 131. I was able to listen in to the committee hearing on February 24, and was moved by the testimony offered by so many individuals. On behalf of AARP Alaska's members, I ask that SB 131 be passed out of committee and moved through the process to enactment.

After hearing the comments offered during public testimony, I wish to provide yet another aspect of the importance of non-discrimination protections for LGBT individuals. AARP, nationally, has begun a partnership with SAGE USA (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) to help shine a light on the little understood situation LGBT individuals face as they grow old.

In short, the very unfortunate choice older LGBT individuals must face is whether they must go "back in the closet." As people age, we typically experience a series of losses which create varying degrees of dependency on others, and a consequent sense of vulnerability. The need to feel safe (including the need for respect and dignity) increases when having to depend on persons or systems other than one's self. While research on the experience of older LGBT individuals is only now beginning to describe their situation, results show some patterns that underscore the need for increased protection. We know, for instance, that LGBT older adults are:

- Five times less likely to access senior services
- Experience higher poverty rates than senior heterosexual counterparts
- Significantly more likely to delay or not seek needed medical care
- More likely to have problems with substance abuse
- At higher risk for cancer and other serious health conditions (including depression)
- Half as likely as heterosexual elders to have family members to call for help, and are three times less likely to have children.
- Hesitant to disclose sexual orientation to their primary care provider

Many of these disparities can be attributed to the effects of historical prejudice, including disruption to families (who are so necessary to our long term care system), and diminished opportunities to earn a living and save for retirement (often due to lifelong employment discrimination). Ongoing stigma often interferes with full participation in community and society, leaving a significant number of LGBT older adults reluctant to seek needed services and support from potentially hostile aging and health service providers. Almost a third of gay and lesbian Baby Boomers identify discrimination as their greatest concern about aging....as if aging weren't concerning enough!

The experience of discrimination over a lifetime (remembering today's LGBT elders could have been a victim of violence, or seen their expressions of love labeled a psychiatric disorder, a criminal activity, anti-family, immoral, and a security risk) takes a toll and predisposes to being highly vigilant and cautious. When faced with the vulnerabilities of long term care, one might have to "sweep the house" of all evidence if a home health aide is due to pay a visit; or if living in an assisted living home or nursing home, one would have to make continuous decisions about whether this person or that one, whether staff or other residents, might be safe enough with whom to share the stories of one's life. For all persons coming to the end of life, the story of that life is among the most precious things a person has. It is hard to imagine the sense of loss and grief if that story had to be kept secret or denied. Furthermore, to live in a dependent care situation might have implications about whom the LGBT elder is able to have in to visit, or whether those friends would themselves feel comfortable coming into that environment to visit...all of which has the potential to increase an unnecessary sense of loneliness and isolation.

The protections most people take for granted are urgently needed for LGBT older adults, especially with regard to public accommodations, which would include senior centers, health care facilities, assisted living homes, and skilled nursing facilities. No one should have to feel unsafe when they are old and vulnerable, and when so few choices may remain. Nor should anyone have to hide their own life out of fear of what others might say or do. SB 131 is a long-needed and crucial part of Alaska's proud history of self-determination and respect for individual human beings.

AARP Alaska offers our thanks to you and the Senate HSS Committee, and we furthermore offer our strong support for the passage of SB 131 out of committee. Please feel free to contact us if we can be helpful with any further information.

Respectfully,



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CC: Sen. Berta Gardner  
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