LGBT advocates hope to use White House aging forum to advance agenda

Ikea Catu and her partner, Carmen Guzman, hold signs in front of The Supreme Court in June after the decision in favor of same-sex marriage. Gay rights advocates hope to build on recent successes. (Brittany Greeson/The Washington Post)

By Fredrick Kunkle

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The last time the White House hosted its once-per-decade Conference on Aging, at least 1,200 advocates and policymakers attended. Among them was a single delegate representing older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

On Monday, President Obama is expected to host a smaller affair, with perhaps 200 delegates. But there will be four people officially representing the interests of older LGBT people, including Michael Adams, executive director of Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders (SAGE). Two of the LGBT representatives are octogenarians. One of them is transgender.

“There’s a story there from the LGBT angle about the progress we’ve made on LGBT issues,” Adams said Friday. “For the LGBT community, and for people who are focused on LGBT issues, the question is: Where do we go now?”

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s landmark decision upholding the right to same-sex marriage, LGBT advocates are hoping to use the conference to raise awareness of the difficulties older gay people and lesbians still face, especially when it comes to housing discrimination in retirement or care facilities. Adams said much remains to be done to combat routine discrimination against gay people in other areas, too. Gay people can now marry anywhere in the country, but in a majority of states, they could still lose their jobs or be denied housing or other services for being gay, he said.

“We understand the significance of a conference like this in that regard,” Adams said.

The conference comes as the United States is becoming an older society. With 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 every day, the population of people that age and older is projected to reach 88.5 million by 2050 — more than double its size in 2010. The demographic change is expected to increase the burden
on Medicaid and Medicare, as Alzheimer’s and other age-related ailments become more prevalent. So will the burden on caregivers, most of whom are family members who sacrifice their time — and, often, finances — to look after aging parents and relatives.

“The timing is fortuitous to have this,” said Ronald C. Petersen, who heads the Mayo Clinic Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center and the Mayo Clinic Study of Aging. He said the conference offers a spotlight on aging issues just as the call for more federal investment in Alzheimer’s disease research has become more urgent.

And yet, this was the conference that almost wasn’t. In the past, the conference’s funding and agenda were set by Congress through the 1965 Older Americans Act, a measure that helps fund a wide variety of community services for older people. The bill has not been reauthorized, but the White House went ahead with the conference anyway, in part relying on funding from AARP. The powerful lobby for the 50-plus crowd sponsored five regional conferences on aging leading up to Monday’s conference in the White House.

“The most concrete thing we’re hoping that comes out of it is reauthorization of the Older Americans Act,” said Sandy Markwood, chief executive of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, which is part of a nationwide network of providers set up by the Older Americans Act. She said the measure funds a number of services that allow people to remain in their homes as they age — a policy known as aging in place — without having to spend down their savings or liquidate assets in order to qualify for services from Medicaid.

Obama is scheduled to address the delegates Monday morning, though it remains unknown whether he will address aging among LGBT people specifically. The meeting’s agenda will focus on ways of easing the burden for the nation’s unofficial army of caregivers, fighting elder abuse, enhancing long-term support and financial security for older people, and how technology can ease the experience of aging. The White House is using social media and is streaming the event live to encourage participation.

The gathering has been credited with lending additional momentum to the push for Medicare and Medicaid, two Great Society programs that have benefited millions of older Americans, among others. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of those programs. President George W. Bush became the first president to skip the once-a-decade conference since its inception in the early 1960s, largely because of controversy over Medicare’s prescription drug benefit.

Imani Woody, who is co-chair of SAGE Metro DC, an affiliate of the national organization, said she hopes the administration will propose legislation that would compel employers to offer paid leave to caregivers.

The Home Care Fight for $15, a coalition aiming to improve the working conditions for home care workers, released a report Thursday that offered a glimpse at the growing need for professional caregivers. The research, conducted by the Service Employees International Union, found that there are nine consumers for each paid care worker nationwide, with significant variation between states in the contiguous United States. Florida, for example, has what the group calls a “senior care gap” of 35 consumers per worker, compared with a ratio of 4 to 1 in Minnesota.

Woody also urged the White House to push for legislation that would ban discrimination and mandate training on how to assist LGBT people in assisted-living and other retirement facilities.

A 2014 study by the Washington, D.C.-based Equal Rights Center used matched-pair visits in 10 states to determine whether same-sex couples would experience discrimination finding senior housing. The organization said its findings showed that in 96 of 200 tests, or 48 percent, the same-sex couple was subjected to some sort of adverse discriminatory treatment, compared with that received by a heterosexual couple.
“Do I come out today to this doctor? Do I come out to this social services person who may not have had training? Do I come out to my older peer?”

Woody said older gay people often face more discrimination, especially from peers who grew up at a time when there was greater intolerance for homosexuality.

“They may harbor stereotypes more than the younger generation,” she said.