

**THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LESBIAN AND GAY
ALCOHOLISM PROFESSIONALS (NALGAP): A RETROSPECTIVE**

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In 1993, twenty-four years after Stonewall (the event marking the start of the lesbian and gay liberation movement), a president of the the United States who acknowledges the existence of gays and who promised to enable "gays in the military" to be out safely took office. In some ways, President Clinton's stance has helped to create some better conditions for lesbians and gay men. Many have become more visible and more vocal and have begun to wield some political clout. Lesbians and gay men have been featured on the covers of Newsweek as well as other magazines. Some lesbians and gay men have been appointed to significant positions in the federal government.

But such visibility and progress have met, also, with powerful resistance. The current battles and controversies set off this year about "gays in the military" have culminated in a destructive policy of "Don't ask, don't tell" as a way of soothing and resolving the panic, discomfort, and homophobia of those who are opposed to gays and lesbians having a voice or being visible in our society. The controversy over gays in the military has become a kind of emotional center and a representation of the struggle between oppressors of lesbians/gays and those who advocate freedom and safety for lesbians/gays. The struggle, however, is counteractional--the more visible and vocal the advocates become, the harder it is for closeted lesbians and gays to make their way safely in this society. Paradoxically, openness elicits denial, not only in those who are gay/lesbian and in those who would help them, but also in those who would silence them. "Don't ask, don't tell" is the perfect paradigm for both external and internalized homophobia.

Those of us who have been activists in the gay and lesbian health field, especially in the field of alcoholism and other drug addictions, know that the concept and consequences of "Don't ask, don't tell" lie at the heart of what we have been fighting against for many years. We have had to fight the battle on not one but two fronts. The lesbian and gay communities have long been in denial of alcoholism and drug addiction as problems. They have often not acknowledged its epidemic proportions and ignored the truths that alcoholism and drug abuse cripple and kill. And the alcoholism and drug addiction treatment fields have long been in denial of their own homophobia and resulting destructive behavior. Too often they have ignored and not dealt with the major issues of sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity and as a result have failed at times to give proper treatment.

In July of 1979, the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Alcoholism Professionals (NALGAP) was formed in order to fight these battles. The original charter stated NALGAP's three primary goals: 1) to advocate for good, non-homophobic treatment for lesbians and gays suffering from alcoholism and other drug addictions; 2) to educate gay and lesbian health professionals about alcoholism/addiction; and 3) to provide a support and communication network for gay/lesbian professionals and other interested people.

The fifteen years since then have been filled with set-backs and victories of many different kinds. In 1979 there was no organization to speak out to either the gay or lesbian communities or the gay/lesbian health field about addiction. And no one seemed to be addressing the rampant denial in both groups. In the fall of '79, NALGAP was welcomed as a new member of the National Gay Health Coalition (NGHC) which was the first step toward educating the gay/lesbian worlds. Such education was sorely needed. At the first Lesbian and Gay Rights March on Washington in 1979, the Coalition threw a party for its members and served only alcoholic beverages. At the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation (NLGHF) annual conference in 1980, one of the keynote speakers told a "drunk joke," at which, of course, most people laughed most heartily. The lack of consciousness exhibited at that conference marked the cultural attitudes prevalent in both the gay/lesbian health field and the larger

communities. No speaker at that conference addressed the powerful belief that the most common and acceptable way to **be** gay or lesbian and to cope with one's oppression was to drink and/or drug. Most people were not examining the fact that the bars and the baths were the center of gay/lesbian life and that lesbians and gays drank and/or drugged to facilitate their social/sexual interactions or to medicate the pain of coming out (or not) or the pain of isolation or the pain of being lesbian or gay in a homophobic culture. Most lesbian and gay health professionals as well as most gays and lesbians in the culture itself were filled with denial. The use and abuse of alcohol and so-called "recreational drugs" were generally accepted as a normal part of the lifestyle, as a part of the way of life. And most people didn't seem to want to know any different. Alcophobia had the same effects on the lesbian/gay communities as did homophobia on the larger society--"Don't ask, don't tell." Alcophobia and homophobia are mirror images of one another.

NALGAP's experiences at the 1981 NLGHF conference weren't much more encouraging. We had a booth to give out information. A few people stopped to talk and take handouts. But most either peered at us suspiciously, walked by without looking at us, laughed, or ignored us totally. NALGAP's table at the 1981 Gay Pride March in New York City drew much the same reactions.

Fortunately, NALGAP became an increasingly powerful and influential presence. NALGAP members submitted workshops on alcoholism/other drug addictions to NLGHF and presented at the conferences that followed. In the meantime, a cultural revolution of sober people was occurring. There was a growing sober presence in the gay and lesbian communities which synergized with NALGAP's activities--by 1979, gay/lesbian meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Alanon were being organized and were on the increase. In addition, annual lesbian/gay AA/Alanon Roundups began occurring in major cities in the United States and Canada. Recovering gay men and lesbians swelled the numbers of people advocating sobriety as a viable way of life within the lesbian and gay communities.

NALGAP's influence in the gay/lesbian health field as well as in the communities continued to grow. At the 1983 NLGHF conference, NALGAP received the Jane Addams-Howard Brown Award in recognition of its advocacy of lesbians and gay men affected by alcoholism and other drug addictions. Both organizations had come a long way in a very short period of time. In the eleven years since, NALGAP has held two national conferences of its own (in 1985, 1986) and then joined forces with the NLGHF to hold a mini-conference within the larger NLGHF conference every year. The purpose is to provide a visible presence about addictions, to disseminate information, and to provide a central meeting place for gay and lesbian professionals in the addictions field.

Fighting the battle against alcophobia among gays and lesbians, especially those in the health professions, has been a major task for NALGAP. The other major task has been to fight against homophobia and a lack of knowledge about lesbians and gays amongst professionals in the alcoholism/addiction field. As soon as NALGAP was formed in July of 1979, members began presenting about gay/lesbian treatment issues and needs at national and regional conferences on alcoholism/drug abuse. The fight for visibility, for recognition, for good, affirmative treatment for chemically dependent lesbians and gay men had begun. The impetus for impassioned advocacy for gay/lesbian clients came from the many phone calls, personal communications, and heart-rending letters NALGAP received, spelling out the cruelly homophobic treatment many lesbians and gays had to endure in order to get any treatment at all. In the ensuing years, NALGAP's advocacy efforts increased and expanded.

In 1980, the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA) included in its annual national conference a day and a half long track on gay/lesbian chemical dependency treatment. NALGAP served as a co-sponsor of the track, a promoter of this venture, and a distributor of the resultant literature. This was the first time that any major conference had recognized and attempted to meet the need for information and dialogue about this subject. The response to the Call for Papers was impressive: alcoholism counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers who specialized in alcoholism treatment and who had some experience and interest in

working with chemically dependent lesbians and gay men submitted papers. Until this time there had been only two or three anecdotal papers which addressed the problems faced by lesbians and gays seeking treatment. Ultimately, this conference produced fifteen or so papers which then formed the backbone of the literature on treating gay/lesbian alcoholics. This gay/lesbian track and these papers were the first major statement that there were specific treatment issues which the addiction treatment field needed to learn about.

In addition, at this NCA conference, NALGAP members met with the Executive Director of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), John De Luca, and engaged in a dialogue about the possibilities of NIAAA's support of NALGAP's advocacy efforts. We then arranged for a meeting with the Director and his staff to take place a few months from then. At that later meeting, the Director stated he would try to get funding for NALGAP members to meet and share information and ideas. In addition, he agreed to consider including gays and lesbians among those listed as underserved populations. He also invited NALGAP to send a liaison person to the quarterly meetings held by NIAAA. Although these gains were short-lived because of Reagan's election, NALGAP was able to achieve some recognition for its advocacy efforts.

NALGAP was busy in other areas, too. In 1980, in response to NALGAP's requests, the Rutgers Summer School of Alcohol Studies (SSAS) granted NALGAP members the opportunity to present an eight-hour seminar on gay/lesbian chemical dependency treatment issues. In addition, NALGAP helped form a gay/lesbian caucus at the National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC) conference, thus creating a presence which required people to take note of the existence of chemically dependent gays and lesbians and the need for better treatment for them. NALGAP also became very active in disseminating information in an attempt to educate those who worked with gays and lesbians but knew little about them. From a number of state alcoholism agencies we requested and received mailing lists of treatment facilities in these states. Thus NALGAP was able to provide much helpful educational material and referral information as well.

By 1981, NALGAP had become a vital force in the alcoholism/addictions field. Members were presenting workshops, seminars, and papers geared to teaching other professionals how to provide better treatment to their lesbian and gay clients. In this year the Rutgers Summer School of Alcohol Studies formally recognized the need for educating professionals by adding a course on sexual identity and recovery to its curriculum. NALGAP members taught that course and special interest seminars on treating gay/lesbian chemically dependent clients. Two years later, the SSAS added a general lecture which addressed this vital topic. These activities continue to the present day. In the meantime, other schools and conferences on alcoholism and drug abuse around the country were beginning to recognize the need for courses and trainings about treating chemically dependent lesbians and gays. These were usually taught by NALGAP members.

The year 1981 saw the publication of two firsts--the NALGAP Facilities and Services Directory which listed lesbian/gay sensitive treatment facilities and practitioners nationwide and the NALGAP Bibliography which cited "fugitive literature" (unpublished papers) and published materials about gay/lesbian chemical dependency. Nowhere else was this material available; NALGAP both provided access to and published this material. In 1982, two NALGAP members, Tom Ziebold and John Mongeon, edited the first collection of articles written by gay/lesbian-affirming alcoholism professionals for mental health professionals about treating chemically dependent lesbians and gays. In 1987, three major NALGAP events occurred. NALGAP published the first annotated bibliography of literature on alcoholism and lesbians and gays. The Rutgers University Center of Alcohol Studies library provided a permanent home for the NALGAP Collection of literature on treating chemically dependent gay men and lesbians. And two NALGAP members, Dana Finnegan and Emily McNally, published Dual Identities: Counseling Chemically Dependent Gay Men and Lesbians, the first book about this topic.

In the years since its inception in 1979, NALGAP's phone number has become a kind of "hot line" for treatment professionals seeking assistance in helping their clients, for lesbians and gay men all over the country seeking help as they struggle to get sober in the face of terrible

homophobia, those seeking good and fair treatment and the location of "special interest" AA meetings, and for lesbian and gay treatment professionals seeking support in the midst of homophobic attitudes surrounding them. In addition, NALGAP publishes a newsletter which serves as a part of the support and communication network.

Over these years, NALGAP became a major referral source, a disseminator of information, an educator. But most important of all, it became (and continues to be) the national voice of conscience that advocates for all those gay and lesbian people who have been injured by their alcoholism or other drug addiction and who have also been injured by homophobia. It is a powerful voice that urges treatment professionals to provide treatment geared to the needs and realities of lesbians and gay men. This voice calls for safety in the face of homophobia; for recognition of and respect for the tremendous diversity among people's sexual practices, orientation, and identity. This voice calls for recognition of and respect for the pain and difficulties faced by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and those confused about their sexual identity, especially as they are struggling to become clean and sober. This voice urges acknowledgement of the complexity of every person's life, acceptance of lesbians' and gay men's uniqueness as human beings. This voice calls forth the best that the alcoholism treatment field has to offer.

So, now--fifteen years after NALGAP was founded--where do things stand? Times are still very hard for gays and lesbians--indeed, maybe they're harder now. AIDS has swept through our ranks, and we have lost many of our powerful and important leaders. Treatment programs have been hard hit by the Reagan-Bush years and many have given up trying to train staff and tailor any of their programs to attend to those who are different. And homophobia seems to have become the reigning prejudice of the Nineties.

So--what now? Where do we go from here? Now--perhaps more than ever--there is need for a strong, open, direct, honest voice. A voice that speaks out against the injustices, the cruelties, the destructiveness; a voice that argues that lesbians and gay men must be accorded fair and competent treatment; a voice that advocates for those not yet able to do so in their own behalf. That voice is NALGAP.