



Living on the Edge: Old and Poor in Wisconsin

-Eve Galanter, Chair, Board of Directors, Wisconsin Women's Network

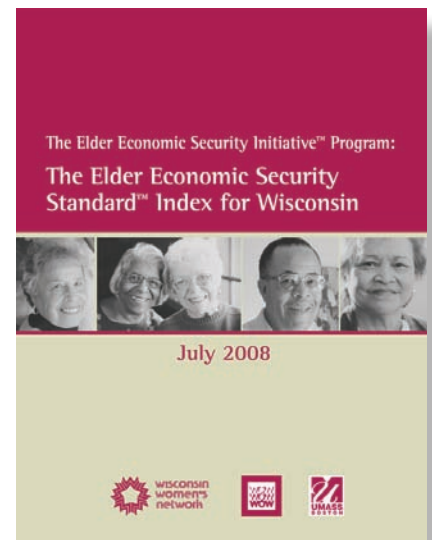
There is an invisible crisis in Wisconsin – one that will only grow more serious in the years to come. It does not get much press, but Wisconsin's elders aged 65 and over struggle every day to make ends meet. Living costs are high, housing is expensive and health care and prescription drug costs can suddenly become astronomical. In the face of rising expenses, coupled with the lack of a cost of living adjustment from Social Security this year and more than likely next, elders may have to spend down retirement savings or face growing debt. At the same time, older adults face a challenging future in which illness, loss of a spouse or partner, or the need for help with daily tasks can plunge seniors into real poverty and even homelessness.

In 2008, the Wisconsin Women's Network sought to address these issues by joining the National Elder Economic Security Initiative, launched by Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), in Washington, D.C. Critical to this work was a new measure of income adequacy. The Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Index (the Elder Index) was tabulated using the WOW-University of Massachusetts Boston Gerontology Institute national methodology. The Elder Index measures cost of living expenses for older adults in today's economy in order to answer key questions

such as: What is an adequate income for older adults in Wisconsin to "age in place" – that is, remain in their own home for as long as they choose? How do financial needs vary according to the life circumstances of elders – whether they are living alone or with spouses or partners, rent or own their homes, drive cars or use other transportation? How do living expenses change as health status and life circumstances change? What happens if elders need long-term care to remain at home?

The Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative provides a framework to help guide public, private and personal decisions

ensuring the wellbeing of today's elders. It provides information critical to aging boomers who encounter issues related to care, living options and economic realities for their parents. The Elder Index puts into action strategies to meet realistic income needs in today's economy that respect the autonomy goals of older adults.



About the Wisconsin Women's Network

Founded in 1979, the Wisconsin Women's Network, a coalition of organizations and individuals, advances the status of women and girls in Wisconsin through communication, education and advocacy.

The Wisconsin Women's Network facilitates communication among its members to strengthen our voices while we work together on issues promoting equity and justice for women and their families.

The Wisconsin Women's Network agenda is based on the principles articulated in Wisconsin Women and the National Plan of Action, resolutions adopted in 1977 at the Wisconsin State Meeting and the first National Women's Conference in Houston.

The impetus for the formation of the Wisconsin Women's Network in 1979 was the dismantling of the Wisconsin Commission on the Status of Women. The Network founders made permanent what had been an informal ad hoc coalition working on a variety of issues. The result is a broad-based coalition of women's organizations, labor unions, religious and educational groups, providers of human services, and business associations furthering understanding of women's issues.



A FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR ELDERS

The Elder Index was developed as a measure of the cost of the basic expenses of household heads 65 or older continuing to live in the community setting of their choice. The Elder Index defines economic security as the financial status where elders have sufficient income (from Social Security, pension, retirement savings and other sources) to cover basic and necessary living expenses. The Elder Index is based on the idea that seniors should be able to meet their expenses without income eligible public support, such as food stamps, Medicaid, subsidized housing or property tax assistance.

WiEESI Project Page:
wiwomensnetwork.org/issues/elder/wieesi

The Elder Index for Wisconsin benchmarks basic living costs for elder households and illustrates how expenses vary both by county and by household. Expenses are based on market costs and do not assume any public or private supports. The Elder Index shows that the average yearly basic living expenses for a single renter of a one-bedroom apartment in Wisconsin is \$19,750.

KEY FINDINGS FOR WISCONSIN

- Elders with incomes at the federal poverty level, or with only average or lower Social Security benefits but no additional income, cannot meet basic living expenses. This is particularly important, since one in four Wisconsin elders live on Social Security alone.

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- Housing costs (mortgage or rent, taxes, utilities and insurance) place a heavy burden on some elder households, representing as much as 44% of total expenses.
- Elders accrue significant health care costs in order to purchase supplemental health and prescription drug coverage in addition to Medicare.
- Even elders who currently make ends meet face an uncertain future if life circumstances change, through the loss of a spouse or partner or a decline in health status.
- The need for home and community-based long-term care can more than double elders' expenses, significantly increasing funds required to meet basic needs.

Because of the county-specific nature of the Elder Index, it can be particularly useful to decision makers at the county level. It can help them understand where limited funds will have the greatest impact on elders' economic security, and can be used to encourage elders locally to apply for benefits and access community programs that will help them make ends meet. To access the Elder Index for your county, visit <http://wiwomensnetwork.org/issues/elder/wieesi/2010wieesi>.

For more information on the Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Index, or to schedule a briefing free of charge, contact Wisconsin Women's Network at 608.255.9809 or info@wiwomensnetwork.org.

WWN Website: wiwomensnetwork.org



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