

Updated: Jun 25, 2008 - 01:43:54 am CDT

Elderly on fixed incomes stretching dollars

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DeKALB - Vernon Wilson is cutting down on driving.

The 74-year-old Malta resident carpools with other people in his area to buy groceries since it now costs more than \$4 for a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline. Since he and his wife are retired and live on fixed incomes, escalating costs for food and fuel have led them to change their spending habits, Wilson said.

"We put a group together and head out when we need things from the stores," Wilson said Tuesday while at the Family Service Agency's Senior Services Center in DeKalb. "Even the prices of oil changes have gone up a little."

Escalating prices for food, fuel, utilities and health care are changing people's behaviors in numerous demographics, but especially among retirees.

A study released Monday comparing 2007 living expenses - including transportation, food and medical costs - with average Social Security payments and federal poverty guidelines showed costs for the elderly in DeKalb and Lee counties are ahead of revenues by a gap of about two-to-one.

In Illinois, Social Security is the only source of income for one out of five retired single elders and one out of nine retired elder couples, according to the study's executive summary. About 9 percent, or 130,300 people, of Illinois' 1.5 million residents older than 65 are consider to live in poverty, according to the executive summary.

DeKalb County had about 9,533 residents older than 65 as of 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Elder Economic Security Standard Project at the Gerontology Institute at University of Massachusetts Boston performed the finances study of all Illinois counties, said Laura Henze Russell, director of the EESSP.

"It shows elders are between a rock and a hard place," Russell said Tuesday.

As costs sprint past money coming in, organizations that offer services to seniors are

feeling the crunch too.

The DeKalb-based Voluntary Action Center runs the county's Meals on Wheels program, and is feeling a two-pronged pinch from increased expenses with food and gas. Costs of food purchased by the organization has gone up about 25 percent in about the last two years, VAC Associate Director Ellen Rogers said

"We haven't realized anything near that increase in grants we get," Rogers said. "We're revisiting menus to cut back on pricing without compromising quality. It doesn't do any good if people don't eat the food."

The immediate effect on the program is a waiting list of 25 people that stands to get longer, Rogers said. Staff at VAC have discussed ways to consolidate services to more distant, rural areas of the county by making fewer food deliveries a week, although nothing of that nature has been decided yet, Rogers said.

"Even \$3 a gallon for gas was hurting us," Rogers said. "But we still haven't seen any drop in volunteers with the gas prices, and we don't want to lose that person-to-person connection people get from the deliveries. It's not just food."

Case managers at Elder Care Services of DeKalb County often drive to seniors' homes to consult with them on ways to meet their living needs, Executive Director Ziv Sabin said. The organization hasn't reduced their services and are offering gift certificates to local farmers' markets for seniors to help with food costs

"It's a struggle for everybody including our staff," said Ziv Sabin. "Foreclosures are also causing a problem with families having to unite under a single house."

But some positives have risen in spite of the expenses.

Ann Lindahl, director of the Senior Services Center, said some elderly people have found healthful ways around the gas costs by walking and riding bicycles. The change in transportation has even sparked new hobbies, Lindahl said.

"One man discovered nature and now brings in different leaves to look up where they came from," Lindahl said. "That creates good discussion and it's cognitive experience they need."