



7/16/2008 11:00:00 AM

Rep. Mike Huebsch: Fighting for Wisconsin's seniors

**By Rep. Mike Huebsch
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Wisconsin's senior citizens are living longer, fuller, more active lives than any generation in history, and however they choose to spend their time, I don't think anyone would argue that they don't deserve to enjoy the retirement they've earned with a lifetime of hard work. My colleagues and I are working hard to make ours the best state in the nation to live, work, raise a family and retire and give those who are considering leaving Wisconsin in their retirement reasons to stay.

Unfortunately, the struggling economy has thrown a wrench into many of our seniors' plans, and those living on fixed incomes are being hit harder than most by the rising cost of everything from gas to groceries. This month, a Washington D.C.-based group released a study called the "Elder Economic Security Standard Index for Wisconsin" to shed some light on the difficulties facing our seniors. The picture painted by the study is troubling, to say the least.

The report found that seniors are "coming up short" in making ends meet, and finding it harder and harder to cover basic living expenses. It contained five key findings:

1. Low-income seniors in Wisconsin cannot meet their basic living expenses.
2. Housing costs put a heavy burden on seniors' living conditions, representing as much as 44 percent of total expenses
3. The high cost of health care and prescription drugs is a significant factor for most seniors.
4. Even seniors who are well-off and making ends meet are facing uncertainty in the future.
5. Quality long-term care is costly, and can more than double a senior's expenses in some cases.

The report was released as part of a national effort to raise awareness and shape public policy to improve seniors' well being, but it certainly isn't the first time these issues have been on our radar screen.

In the most recent state budget, Assembly Republicans passed a much-needed tax cut aimed at seniors with fixed incomes, allowing them to exclude their retirement income from their state taxes. That money already was taxed when it was earned and put away for retirement; there's no reason we need to tax it again when seniors decide to spend it. This isn't the first time Republicans have achieved an important victory over taxes for seniors; in 2005 we eliminated the state tax on Social Security benefits and passed a property tax credit for disabled veterans and their families as well.

Since its creation in 2001, Wisconsin's prescription drug program SeniorCare has served more than 107,000 Wisconsin seniors with simple, affordable user-friendly assistance. Last year, the federal government announced that it would be shutting down the SeniorCare program. My colleagues and I moved quickly, working with both sides of the aisle and the federal government to renew the program for an additional two and a half years.

We also expanded Family Care statewide, a program that assists seniors and their families with their long-term care needs and helps folks stay in their own homes. The program is currently available in only seven counties, but we provided funding in the state budget to expand the program to 100 percent of the state's elderly population in future years.

Democrats in the state Senate proposed a 69 percent hike on the state's nursing home bed assessment, and a \$13.8 million raid of nursing home dollars to pay for unrelated programs. Assembly Republicans held firm and rejected both, and instead increased the MA reimbursement rate to nursing homes by 2 percent in each of the two budget years.

We passed a property tax freeze, as well, to prevent seniors from being driven out of their homes by increasing property tax bills, and continue to fight every step of the way to make sure that your tax dollars are being spent wisely. And perhaps most importantly, Republicans in the state Assembly rejected 98 percent of the massive tax hikes proposed by Democrats this session. In a troubled economy and with budgets throughout the state being stretched thin, now is certainly not the time for the government to be digging even deeper in your pockets.

Helping seniors meet their needs should be a higher priority for our government than meeting its own wants. For a lifetime of sacrifice, service and hard work, our seniors deserve nothing less.

- Rep. Mike Huebsch, R-West Salem, is Assembly speaker.