

Many of state's elderly near poverty

By Sara Boyd, Green Bay Press-Gazette (Wisconsin)

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It's sometimes difficult for Marie Nickel of Suamico to make ends meet.

The widowed homeowner earns \$922 a month working at a senior resource center, but her dollars just don't stretch very far these days especially with her health problems.

She needs frequent blood transfusions, each one totaling nearly \$6,000, she said. Most of it is covered by insurance, but not all of it, she said.

On top of that, the home she's lived in for 50 years needs repairs.

"I didn't have money to get anything," she said.

Nickel's situation is like that of many other senior citizens in Wisconsin who are trying to achieve economic stability but are staggering near poverty, according to the Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative.

Elderly adults living alone in Wisconsin need between \$16,909 and \$22,909 a year for basic living costs. The cost reaches more than \$33,000 for elderly couples, according to the report released Wednesday in Green Bay.

In Brown County, seniors living alone need up to \$25,000 each year, and couples need as much as \$35,000, the report states. Elderly residents are defined as those 65 years and older.

The Wisconsin Women's Network, in collaboration with Wider Opportunities for Women, launched the state initiative. It includes a standard county-by-county index that ranks income needed for older residents to stay afloat.

With nearly 20 percent of Wisconsin elders relying solely on Social Security, most cannot meet their expenses and that's not including health-related costs, said Pat Finder-Stone of the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups.

"It's hard for elders to make ends meet with the rising costs of goods and services," she said. "As we age, health often declines, and with that, (there's) increased costs, greater need for assistance and greater expenses for our older people."

The average Social Security payment for Brown County elders in 2008 was \$13,355, the report found.

The 2008 federal poverty level for a single adult is \$10,400, but that standard should be updated with economic hardships, said Ramsey Alwin, director of the National Elder Economic Security Initiative.

"Too often, policy makers confuse the federal poverty level, essentially a measure of deprivation, with what the index demonstrates: true income necessary to get by," Alwin said.