

Study: Many seniors can't afford basic necessities

By Gina Duwe, The Janesville Gazette (Wisconsin)

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Jul. 9--JANESVILLE -- An elder resident of Rock County who owns a home needs \$17,639 annually to cover basic living expenses, while a couple needs \$27,405, a new study released Tuesday found.

But the average county Social Security payment this year is \$13,547 for an individual and \$22,108 for a couple, leaving a gap of \$4,000 to \$5,000, according to the study.

The Elder Economic Security Standard Index shows many senior citizens in Wisconsin don't earn enough money to meet their basic living expenses.

The report is part of a national effort led by Wider Opportunities for Women to raise awareness and shape public policy to improve seniors' economic well-being.

The Wisconsin study determined that a single person older than 65 needs at least \$19,810 a year to meet basic living expenses. But it found that the average income of a woman older than 65 is just \$15,395. The average for a male senior citizen is just \$18,223.

The index measures the cost of basic expenses including housing, food, transportation and health care for older adults in today's economy to continue living in the community setting of their choice.

The federal poverty level standard--used for many assistance programs--is \$10,400 for a single person and \$14,000 for a couple, leaving advocates pushing for the new index to replace the outdated poverty level.

"Social Security was never intended to be the sole source of retirement income," said Sharyn Wisniewski, chairwoman of the Wisconsin Women's Network, in a statement. "But economic conditions, the loss of employer-sponsored retirement plans and disadvantages that disproportionately affect women and people of color leave few options for retirees today."

The study also found:

-- Social Security is the only source of income for one of five seniors in Wisconsin, most of whom are women.

-- Housing costs put a heavy burden on some elder households, representing as much as 44 percent of their total expenses.

-- An elder paying market-rate rent in Wisconsin has expenses reduced by only 30 percent to 36 percent when a spouse dies, yet his or her income mix of Social Security and/or pension income might decrease substantially.

-- Elders in Wisconsin face combined health care costs (insurance premiums plus co-pays, deductibles, fees and other out-of-pocket expenses) of \$384 to \$402 per month.

-- The need for home and community-based long-term care can double or even triple an elder's expenses. Adding a low level of care for one person adds \$7,200 per year to living costs. Requiring a medium level of care adds \$18,900, and needing a high level of care adds \$33,600 to \$42,000.

Ramsey Alwin, Wider Opportunities for Woman program director, said the numbers show that both public and private solutions are needed to bridge the gap.

"Wisconsin elders and their supporters have the opportunity to shape realistic and groundbreaking policy that will not only benefit Wisconsin seniors but can lead the way to critical national policy and programs, whether they be related to retirement income, health or work," Alwin said.

Wisconsin is the fifth state to launch the index, which will be a new tool to help policy makers, advocates and service providers better assess the outcomes of elder policies.

Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Waunakee, chairman of the state Senate Health Committee, said in a statement: "We need to build off of our existing programs for the elderly like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security as well as our state programs like SeniorCare to ensure that no senior citizen is forced to choose between health care and food or shelter."

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