

# Barstow's seniors are no exception to recession woes

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While layoffs and business closures have hit Barstow's workforce, seniors have their own set of issues to deal with in the recession.

For some, like Betty Williams and Donald Murphy, who live together in Murphy's house in Barstow, the cost of basic items like groceries is an issue. The couple comes to eat lunch at the Barstow Senior Citizens Center, which provides lunch to seniors on a sliding scale of \$3 or less -- five days a week. They eat half their lunch at the center and wrap the other half up to eat later, Murphy said.

"We came before the recession, but now we take food home," he said.

Others, like retired Goldstone employee George Farner, have taken a direct hit to their income from the stock market crash. Since the beginning of 2009 alone, Farner said his 401K retirement investments have lost \$5,000.

Senior center President Jeff Eason, Sr., said he has noticed a steady increase in the number of seniors coming in for meals since the economy began to head south, beginning in late 2007.

The demands on the home-delivered meal program have also increased, said senior center nutrition program director Maurice Lessard. The center only receives county funding to feed 38 homebound seniors, but rather than put anyone on a waiting list, it is currently feeding 57 people and bearing the additional cost, he said.

Lynn Daucher, director of the California Department of Aging, said the recession may be harder on seniors than on the population as a whole, both because of the loss of retirement funds and because it is more difficult for seniors to find work if they need to supplement their retirement income. People approaching retirement age may have to work longer in order to retire with security.

"I think one change we're going to be seeing is that the image people have of retirees touring around in their motor homes or playing golf is going to change, because more and more seniors are going to have to work," she said.

Data recently released as part of a study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, a research and advocacy group focused on poverty, shows that San Bernardino County's seniors are in a slightly worse economic plight than seniors in California as a whole.

A little more than half of the county's seniors have a hard time paying for their basic necessities, even if their income exceeds the federal standard for poverty, according to the data, which relies on a newly developed standard called the **Elder Economic Security Index**. The **Elder Index** looks at how much it costs for seniors to pay for basic costs like food, housing and healthcare in each county in California.

The researchers are hoping to see the new index more widely used by government programs, said Steven Wallace, a professor of public health at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

The recently released data was collected in 2007, and Wallace said he would expect to see that the number of seniors struggling has increased since then.

In some cases, however, seniors may be better off than the young in the current economy. Retired Marine Corps Logistics Base civil servants Lee and Betty Fernandez said they feel that young parents with children to feed are hit harder than retirees like them. The couple own their house outright, and their retirement savings are secure.

Betty said that at one point she considered switching from the Thrift Savings Plan administered by the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board to a 401K plan.

"I never got around to it, and thank God," she said.

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