

The Capital Times (Madison, Wisconsin)
May 21, 2009

ELDERS MAY SUFFER THE MOST FROM RECESSION

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LENGTH: 619 words

We all know the current state of our nation's economy is bleak. News stories are focusing on bailouts and emergency funding for institutions, and on the president's stimulus package. We hear less, however, about how this crisis impacts our communities and, in particular, how it is affecting older Americans, many of whom live on fixed incomes that can't accommodate increased prices for food, medical care and other necessities.

It is reasonable to argue that elders are the group most likely to suffer deep, ill effects from the recession. Many are already struggling to cope with higher grocery bills and energy costs. Some go without full doses of prescription medications. Others cut back on home heating oil or stop attending social functions, which are an important part of maintaining health, dignity and well-being.

Most of Wisconsin's elders did what was right. They worked hard and planned for the future. Now retired, a majority of elders live on Social Security and perhaps some personal savings or investment income.

Nearly one fourth of Wisconsin's elders live on Social Security income alone. On average, Social Security provides \$11,331 a year for an older woman and \$15,196 for an older man in Wisconsin -- \$944 and \$1,266 a month, respectively. In many cases, this amounts to just a little more than the woefully outdated federal poverty level, which is just \$10,830 for a single elder and \$14,570 for an older couple.

Family caregiving responsibilities, dwindling health, and erosions in pensions and other benefits have complicated even the best-laid plans.

These numbers are particularly striking when contrasted against the true cost of living. Here in Wisconsin the average monthly living expenses for a single elder total \$1,513. For a couple, the monthly total is \$2,332. This rate varies from county to county, depending primarily on the cost of housing.

In Dane County, for example, a single elder needs \$1,659 and a couple needs \$2,468. The numbers are calculated for every county in Wisconsin using the Wisconsin **Elder Economic Security Index (Elder Index)**, a tool created by Wider Opportunities for Women, a national nonprofit group, in association with the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

The Wisconsin Women's Network, in collaboration with a diverse statewide coalition of service providers, advocates, state administrators, policymakers and others, applies the **Elder Index** locally to inform and provide advice on public policies, programs and services that help ensure the economic security of Wisconsin's elders.

It is critical that policymakers address economic vulnerability of our elders. Despite the significant strain on Wisconsin's budget, there are options available to promote the economic security of Wisconsin's elders, such as: -- Support the development of SeniorCare Plus to allow elders to choose between the popular Senior Care

prescription drug program or expanded Medicare savings program, to expand access and lead to greater cost savings.

-- Make sure older adults know that help exists for them to buy food and pay Medicare Part B premiums. In using these programs, older adults can conserve their cash to pay for things like transportation, rent and utilities.

Wisconsin's elders have contributed to the strength of our communities, our state and our nation by meeting their financial, civic and moral obligations year after year. I encourage all of us, not just policymakers, to answer the call to service and volunteer in your community to assist our elderly neighbors. It's time for us to meet our obligations to them by providing them with the right resources to age in place with dignity.