

New index helps seniors know income they need to live well

BY DAVE PERSON
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KALAMAZOO -- No one wants to retire to a life of financial stress, but many people do - especially if Social Security is their only source of income, as it is for one in every four retirees in Michigan.

A woman older than 65 qualifies, on the average, for about \$12,000 in Social Security benefits a year. The average over-65 male gets \$16,300 annually, said Kate White, executive director of Elder Law of Michigan Inc.

Those numbers are greater than the federal poverty level of "\$10,000 and change," she said, but far less than the yearly average of \$19,058 seniors in Michigan need just to cover their basic needs.

"This is a huge gap," White told a gathering of Kalamazoo County Advocates for Senior Issues this week. "It's not cheap to grow older."

Officials are hoping a new, county-by-county estimates of income seniors need to meet basic needs will help people plan better for retirement. The estimates were determined by the **Michigan Elder Economic Security Index Initiative**, sponsored by Elder Law of Michigan and Wider Opportunities for Women and other organizations and unveiled last month.

Index information can help seniors decide when to retire or take buyouts, whether they should consider continued employment after age 65, how much they need to budget for food, housing, medical care, utilities, etc., and the cost of long-term health care when an older adult begins to need assistance on a daily basis.

More information is available by going to the Web site www.elderlawofmi.org and clicking on "The **Elder Economic Security Standard Index** for Michigan."

"It's a benchmark which can be used to work with as we look at basic needs," state Rep. Robert Jones, D-Kalamazoo, told the KCASI audience of about 30 on Monday at Senior Services of Kalamazoo. "It gives us an opportunity to start looking at things in a different way."

In contrast to the poverty level, which is based on food affordability, the index looks at many factors and determines what people need to live a "quality" life, Jones said.

If a senior doesn't have an income at the index level, Jones said, he or she is probably facing decisions such as whether to buy food or pay utility bills or whether to buy food or purchase medicine.

"They go more and more into debt and compromise quality of life and their ability to stay out of debt," he said.

White said that, according to information in the index study, older women and people of color are disproportionately disadvantaged.

"There are a lot of seniors who don't have enough food to eat," she said.

If, according to the index, seniors are living at a level that compromises their quality of life, there are avenues for assistance, White said.

She urged people to call the Benefits Enrollment Center, (800) 347-5297, to get help applying for benefits for someone who is struggling financially.

Also at the KCASI meeting, Judy Sivak, executive director of the Area Agency on Aging Region IIIA, which covers Kalamazoo County, urged people to contact their representatives in Lansing to oppose a Republican proposal to balance the 2010 state budget. She said the proposal calls for a \$24 million cut in state funds to the Office of Services to the Aging.

The cut, she said, would eliminate 90 percent of state funding for home-delivered services, such as Meals on Wheels.