

# It's rough sledding financially for N.J.'s senior citizens

BY GRACE EGAN

**A**re senior citizens in New Jersey living on Easy Street? We think not.

The sole income for more than 25 percent of New Jersey's senior citizens is their Social Security benefit, which averages \$12,741 a year for women and \$16,581 for men. However, some receive as little as \$600 a month, which only provides \$7,200 annually.

So, what is the cost of living in the Garden State? According to the New Jersey Elder Index, it can cost elders \$23,452 to \$49,442 for their basic expenses. The variance is dependent upon their housing status: Are they living in an apartment, do they own their own home, and does that home still have a mortgage? Usually, a homeowner without a mortgage incurs the lowest costs. This information can be found in the New Jersey Elder Index released in May by the New Jersey Foundation for Aging. Elders who still have a mortgage have the highest cost of living.

Aside from housing, health care is another big expense for those who are 65 and older. We often think of Medicare as a free program, but this is not the reality. Monthly Part B and Part D premiums are subtracted from a senior citizen's monthly Social Security benefit. Health costs, estimated to be \$414 a month, also include the "medigap" coverage, plus out-of-pocket expenses. Health costs for an elder couple are doubled, since there is no family plan for senior citizens.

So what are we looking at? Let's consider that the average monthly Social Security benefit for a woman is \$1,040. This is her sole monthly income. The average costs include monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment — \$997; food — \$234; health care — \$414, transportation — \$191; and perhaps some miscellaneous items — another \$326. That adds up to \$2,162. When we look at these costs,

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which are based on a "bare-bones" budget and do not include any entertainment, such as movies or vacations, we can see how difficult it is to age well in New Jersey.

These costs have been researched and presented in the New Jersey Elder Index, where there are tables that reflect the costs for senior citizens living in each of the 21 counties. The Elder Index can be found at [njfoundationforaging.org/issues.html](http://njfoundationforaging.org/issues.html).

How does a senior citizen make ends meet with average monthly expenses totaling \$2,162 and a Social Security benefit of \$1,040? The resulting gap is \$1,122. Where do they cut expenses? Rent or mortgage? Food? Health care? This dilemma is the daily challenge of thousands of senior citizens. Remember that one in four senior citizens in the state lives solely on his or her Social Security benefit. Data indicate that 39 percent of New Jersey senior citizens over age 65 have incomes below \$15,000. As senior citizens age, their asset level drops and they do not have the earning power to replenish it.

Public benefits help many senior citizens close the gap, but not all. The key is making access to these services senior citizen-friendly. The biggest cost for senior citizens is hous-

ing. New Jersey has excessive waiting lists for affordable housing for people of all ages. There is an elaborate maze to maneuver in order to sign up to be on the lists. People linger on waiting lists for years, due to the continual shortage of federal and state housing programs. Change is possible, but we need to make the application program for housing and supplemental food and meal programs more accessible.

We need to encourage senior citizens, who have found too many barriers to access public benefits programs or were a few dollars over the income limit, to re-apply. The saying for winning the lottery is: "You've got to play to win." Well, you have to apply to receive a public benefit. We have to recognize the widening gap and reach out to our most vulnerable residents to ask them to apply. And then we have to make sure our social services system and infrastructure are there to provide the needed help — specifically, that staff is there to answer questions and to determine all the supports that might sustain senior citizens in their communities. This requires foresight, understanding of their daily struggle and the wisdom to facilitate provision of basic services. This is what we must ask our candidates.

The added costs for community-based long-term care, such as a home health aide, are also captured in these reports. This care adds a staggering monthly cost over the basic living expenses.

We encourage our candidates for New Jersey State Assembly and for governor to learn more. To see the full Elder Index and the policy brief that explores the differences that public benefit programs make, visit [njfoundationforaging.org/issues.html](http://njfoundationforaging.org/issues.html).

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