

Report: Senior payouts are not enough; Social Security checks leave many Massachusetts elders far short of being able to cover basic living expenses

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An older person who lives alone in Massachusetts needs between \$14,700 and \$28,100 a year to cover basic living costs, including the costs of housing and health care, according to a report released today.

The average annual Social Security payment of \$12,024 in 2006 is less than half of what some Massachusetts elders need to cover their basic expenses, according to the Massachusetts Elder Economic Security Standard, often called the Elder Standard.

Social Security is the only form of income for three out of 10 retired elders, and rising Medicare costs are consuming more of that monthly check.

The report was released as part of a new effort to help elders struggling to make ends meet. The campaign is called the Massachusetts Elder Economic Security Initiative, or the Elder Initiative.

The report was prepared for the Massachusetts Association of Older Americans and developed by Wider Opportunities for Women and the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

It also shows that it costs between \$21,400 and \$39,100 for elder couples to meet their basic household expenses. The average Social Security payment for a retired couple in 2006 is \$19,776 - half of what is required in some urban areas.

Social Security is the only income source for one in nine retired couples.

Laura Henze Russell of the Gerontology Institute said the report shows the income requirements for meeting basic needs in every county in Massachusetts. Aging baby boomers and their families are expected to take heed.

Among the findings:

-Single elders and elderly couples who live in Massachusetts can't make ends meet at the poverty level or at the average Social Security payment without housing and health care subsidies.

-The state's high housing costs put a heavy burden on elder households - from 33 to 52 percent of total expenses.

-Health-care costs are the second-largest expense for Massachusetts' elders, who need to purchase supplemental health and prescription-drug coverage to supplement Medicare.

-The loss of a spouse or a change in health insurance can throw seniors into uncertainty.

-The need for long-term care can more than double an elder's expenses, significantly increasing the income needed to meet basic needs.

The new report is intended to spur new programs and policies to help older people live safely, with adequate food, health care and housing, according to Ann L. Hartstein, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Older Americans.

The state Elder Initiative is a part of a national campaign led by Wider Opportunities for Women. The Massachusetts Elder Standard is the first to be released as a part of the national initiative.

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