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More Elderly Residents Facing Threat of Poverty

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Pablo Gasner, 70 years old, sustains himself through various government-subsidized services and is among the 8.5 percent of elderly living in poverty in Alameda County.

For some senior citizens like 70-year-old Berkeley resident Pablo Gasner, aging does not necessarily promise a life of leisure and rest.

Gasner, a low-income senior, rides his bike from the government-subsidized senior housing complex where he lives to the North Berkeley Senior Center every morning.

The center provides him with free classes, computer access and low-cost lunches. Although many seniors do not pay the \$2.75 recommended lunch donation, Gasner says he is able to pay.

However, with only a small savings account and a monthly income of \$328 from Social Security, he is unable to afford a good television, a car or a better bike to replace his old one, which was stolen just outside the center.

When he needs health care, Gasner goes to the UC Berkeley Suitcase Clinic or the Over 60 Health Center, which is covered by his Medicare.

For Gasner and other elderly residents, however, the road to old age may be rockier than expected.

According to Gasner, hard economic times, especially the rising price of gasoline and food, make it difficult for seniors to get many of the services they need.

The latest U.S. Census Bureau

report, released on Aug. 26, found that 8.4 percent of residents over 65 were living in poverty in 2007, a figure that U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, said she found troubling.

"It is unconscionable to have so many of our elderly residents living at or beneath the poverty line, especially when you consider that they reside in a state that is among the wealthiest in the nation," Lee said in a statement.

She stressed the need for Congress to address the poverty problem among the elderly and to make sure that residents can be comfortable "in the twilight of their lives."

Lee is not the only one who is concerned with the issue of poverty and the elderly in the county.

"It's certainly a very serious situation, because older people in general are at elevated risk for a variety of health problems and other types of limitations," said William Satariano, a professor at the School of Public Health who teaches a course on aging. "When you overlay that with the problems of poverty, it just becomes a more serious situation."

Berkeley resident R.Y.H Wong, a volunteer at the center, said he has seen an increase in the number of low-income seniors frequenting the center, and that there are more elderly people living in poverty in Berkeley than in other cities in nearby counties like Marin.

According to the census, the poverty level for elderly residents in Alameda County is still less than the national average, which was 9.7 percent in 2007.

But the number of poor elderly residents may be higher than the census suggests.

Jenny Chung, program manager at the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, which publishes the California Elder Economic Security Standard Index, said the census does not accurately reflect the number of seniors dealing with poverty.

"The federal poverty level actually undercuts or underestimates the cost of living in Alameda County, and this is in large part because it doesn't vary by geographical differences in cost of living," Chung said.

Since Alameda County is one of the higher-cost areas in California, she added, even seniors who are well above the national poverty line can still be struggling.

In addition, many elderly residents living in poverty remain unaware of services available to them.

Gasner said he considers himself lucky to have found out the senior center, which provided him with information about low-cost housing and meal programs.

"I don't know how I would have found out unless I came here," he said.

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