

L.A. County elders face struggle for financial aid

By Rick Orlov and Troy Anderson, Staff Writers

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A report released by the UCLA Center for Policy Research found life is tough financially for Los Angeles County seniors, but most can't benefit from public assistance because the official poverty level is set too low.

For example, a senior renting a one-bedroom apartment in the county spends an average of \$22,841 on his or her basic annual expenses - a figure more than double the federal poverty level of \$10,830.

The poverty level is used by the government to determine Supplemental Security Income, Medi-Cal and other government benefits for low-income people and to allocate funding for other programs.

At a time when growing numbers of seniors are running out of savings, losing their homes and sleeping in their vehicles, ONEGeneration Program Director Cathy Carpenter said she gets to see firsthand the

human impact of such a low federal poverty level for the Los Angeles region.

"I have never seen this many seniors coming in here who have lost their homes," Carpenter said. "Their Medicare is being cut and many are coming in here who are homeless. We have homeless people living in their cars in our driveway."

Chatsworth resident Seymour Shapiro, who is disabled, said it's extremely difficult for seniors to survive on the benefits the government provides using the official poverty level.

"People can't survive on this, and things are just getting worse," said Shapiro, 75. "You have to eat less and less food, and unless

you have subsidized housing, which a lot of people don't have, forget about it - it's hard to survive. The federal government should raise the poverty level."

The release of the report comes as federal officials recently announced they plan to release a "Supplemental Poverty Measure" in the fall of 2011 that will better calculate the basic cost of living.

In California, government officials are increasingly using the Elder Index - the



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actual cost of basic expenses - in developing plans to care for the rapidly growing number of seniors in the state.

Last year, the Grand Jury warned that the county is facing a "senior tsunami" as the number of seniors is expected to double from 1.6 million today to 3 million by 2030.

Susan Smith, director of the Oakland-based Insight Center for Community Economic Development, which commissioned the UCLA study, said the city and county are launching a national demonstration project this month using the Elder Index to assess the full array of economic challenges seniors face.

"In the last few years, seniors have lost trillions of dollars in retirement savings," Smith said. "Seniors who had retirement savings have seen that diminish by half, if not more. A lot of their adult children used to fill the gap for them. But many of them have been laid off or are underemployed now. So the seniors can't rely on family members who could have helped in better economic times."

Seniors losing homes Loan to aid meal program

Meanwhile, with the state budget in

perpetual limbo, Los Angeles city officials on Tuesday said they would provide a \$5million bridge loan to the Department of Aging to run a meals program for 6,700 seniors.

The council voted 10-0 to find the funds from different programs to make sure the meals and jobs training programs continue.

"This is a pressing issue," Laura Trejo, director of the city Department of Aging, told the council. "We are one of three states that are prohibited from getting the money authorized under the Older Americans Act until the state adopts its budget."

Introducing the proposal for the loan, Councilman Jose Huizar said he would also seek to have the city work toward changing how the funds are allocated so the programs can continue even if there is a budget deadlock.

Trejo said the city has provided bridge loans in the past, and the money has always been paid back once it is released by the state.

In all, she said, \$17.2 million is being delayed.

Councilman Bernard Parks, chairman of the Budget and Finance Committee, said the city will be able to go into various funds to find



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the money.

"This is a cash-flow problem," Parks said.

"We need to get the money out there, and there is no problem in being paid back."

A coalition of seniors testified before the council asking for assistance.

Councilman Bill Rosendahl said he has volunteered at senior centers and delivered food as part of the Meals on Wheels program.

"For a lot of these people, it is the only meal they will get in a day," Rosendahl said. "There is nothing more important than a nutritious meal."

Trejo said the money is needed to "avert a crisis" among seniors.

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