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## Index finds growing need

Finances: Guidelines for whether a senior qualifies for financial aid are excluding some who could u

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September 20, 2010

California seniors who are struggling economically face a special challenge. The federal poverty guideline of \$10,830 for a single senior currently acts as the indicator to qualify for financial assistance programs, which can leave seniors who make even slightly above that amount without many options.

"There is that misconception, not just in the Santa Clarita Valley, but almost nationally, for seniors to be expected to live off Social Security. That's just not possible," said Kathy Crone, executive director of the Santa Clarita Valley Senior Center Foundation.

On Sept. 14, the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, on behalf of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, released new Elder Economic Security Standard Index data to assess the full range of economic challenges California seniors face.

According to Susan Smith, director of the California Elder Economic Security Initiative for the Insight Center, the elder index for seniors in Los Angeles County is \$22,481. The study found that approximately 54 percent of its senior population is living on income well below that.

"We're finding seniors need more than double what government sources say they need. Why this matter is that the poverty guideline is used to access services. This data tells the seniors of California what they really need to cover their most basic expenses," Smith said. "I think people are surprised that half of the seniors in L.A. County aren't making it. It's a problem we don't want to admit, that seniors are struggling to keep food in their mouths and a roof over their head."

ElderConnect, a national demonstration project that uses the elder index to match seniors with appropriate programs and services, was also launched on Sept. 14, with full support from Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

"Los Angeles' new Economic Security Initiative, ElderConnect, will establish a holistic, community-based approach to helping seniors in their own efforts to achieve economic stability. This collaborative project between the city, county and Insight Center is a lifeline that will provide critical resources to help older adults stay in their homes and remain active, contributing members of their communities as long as possible,"

Villaraigosa said in a news release.

ElderConnect aims to provide support to seniors without the dizzying array of referrals and application processes. More than 80 state and federal programs are linked to the poverty guideline, Smith noted, including Medi-Cal and food stamps, so the project is an important tool to make sure California seniors get what they need.

As Smith illustrated, the elder index will also provide nonprofit organizations with a way to potentially increase their services.

"Sometimes, even if they're just \$1 over the guideline, a senior can't be served by a program because it doesn't have the funding to do it. We call it a hidden population of need. Now service providers can document the number of folks who fall into that situation and raise funds so that they can say to a foundation, 'Right now, we can't serve people over the poverty line, even though they need it,'" Smith said.

That notion appeals greatly to SuzAnn Nelsen, director of supportive services at The Santa Clarita Valley Senior Center, which serves approximately 35,000 seniors a year.

"It would be very helpful. We shouldn't be compared to other parts of the country; we have problems unique to our community. In California, \$845 is considered poverty level, but average rent in this area for senior apartments is \$900 a month. What are you going to eat on?" Nelsen said. "There's a 10-year waiting list in Los Angeles County to get into subsidized apartments in our community."

Currently, Nelsen's department offers assistance to Santa Clarita Valley seniors who need help paying gas and utility bills. It also provides a monthly food-kit distribution program in conjunction with the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank, the Santa Clarita Valley Food Pantry and the Santa Clarita Valley Committee on Aging.

Requirements for the food distribution kit include being 60 years of age or older, photo identification and proof of income not exceeding \$14,079 per year in a one-person household or \$18,941 for a two-person household.

While the program has helped, Smith noted, it's not solving the problem completely.

"I have found in the last year that more and more seniors are unable to cover their basic needs. We now have a waiting list for the food-bank program; there are so many people asking," Nelsen said. "We try to coordinate those services that seniors need to stay in their own homes and live independently. If the number of dollars for each program could be increased, that would be very helpful."

With the baby-boomer population set to expand the need for services, the elder index will continue to be crucial for California seniors, according to Smith.

"The data serves a purpose to understanding a problem. We're in denial. This could be your neighbor or your mother who are cutting their pills or foregoing heat one month," Smith said. "Seniors are making ridiculous sacrifices every day. These are parents, community leaders, folks who played by the rules. They shouldn't be struggling in their

later years.”

*For more information on the elder index, visit [www.insightcced.org](http://www.insightcced.org) or [www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu](http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu).*

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