

## Joan Aragone: Federal poverty index doesn't match California's costs

By Joan Aragone  
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Angela Pascal, 77, of Pacifica doesn't qualify for food stamps.

Diabetic, with a bad leg, she lives alone on a monthly income of nearly \$1,500 and doesn't drive. She rents the same home she has lived in for 33 years and where she raised her children. Her income is a combination of Social Security benefits and her late husband's pension. She has no savings.

"You don't save money if you raise four children and send them to college," she said in a telephone interview.

Pascal wants to remain independent. After she pays \$900 for rent, she has \$600 left for utilities, transportation, medicine and health care, telephone, entertainment and food.

She wears sweaters day and night to avoid using the heater. Her landlord has kept the rent far below market rate for several years. (Neighbors pay more than \$2,000 a month.) Her children pay for her cable TV and other items and sometimes for her food.

According to the federal poverty index, Pascal isn't "poor." That measurement, which was set in the 1960s and focused on the percentage of income that went for food, set the poverty rate for a single American age 65 and older and living independently at an income of \$10,830 per year -- for every county in the United States, whether one lived in California, Alabama or Maine.

The measure is still being used to determine income eligibility for many public programs, including food stamps. But county officials may make accommodations

where possible in some instances.

Now critics of the outdated federal poverty index want a new national measurement of the actual costs of basic necessities for older adults. Introduced in 2008, it's called the "Elder Index," and it's calculated in California by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. It includes costs for each county and aims to redefine the boundaries of "low income" according to where one lives.

According to current Elder Index figures, released last week for each California county, minimal annual living costs for a single senior living independently in San Mateo County equal \$27,711 per year, higher than in San Francisco County, while costs in Santa Clara County are \$25,237. Kern County ranked lowest in the state, at \$17,277 in estimated costs per year.

In a related paper published this month, researchers from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research said the cost differences among counties are linked to housing.

"Subsidized rent is the only way many people can live in San Mateo County," said Anita Rees, executive



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director of Pacifica Resource Center.

The UCLA paper reveals that renting is the most common housing arrangement for low-income seniors in California. Owners with a mortgage have the highest housing costs, while owners who have paid off a mortgage have the lowest.

The proportion of low-income California seniors who rent is also among the highest nationally. The rate of low-income California seniors who are still paying a mortgage is above the national average -- 22 percent versus 18 percent -- while one-third of low-income California seniors live in a house they own free and clear.

In rural areas, where housing is less expensive, health care costs are higher than they are in urban counties.

Since the Elder Index was introduced, public and private agencies have begun paying attention. About 60 percent of California's Area Agencies on Aging use the index in planning and advocacy efforts, researchers found, and the word is spreading to offices around the state.

"The Elder Index is an essential tool to accurately determine the true cost of living," said Assemblyman Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo. "In San Mateo County I'm proud to say we have made accommodations in certain instances to account for the disparity between local costs and the federal index."

The older population of California is projected to double in the next 20 years. Being aware of the Elder Index now will prepare all of us, including Angela Pascal, for the future.

For information, visit [www.insightcced.org](http://www.insightcced.org) or [www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu](http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu).

## Talk focuses on planning for aging population

In less than 20 years, some experts estimate, more than 25 percent of San Mateo County's population will be older than 65. Many will be nondrivers.

Hear retired city planner Don Weden explain ways communities can adapt to ensure that aging residents, including those without cars, can continue to live active lives. Weden will discuss "Cities For All Ages: Land Use Planning and Our Aging Population," at 10 a.m. Sept. 28 at the Twin Pines Senior & Community Center in Belmont. To reserve a space for this free event, call 650-595-7444.

For comments or story ideas, contact Joan Aragone at 650-348-4332.



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