

- News
- Jobs
- Homes
- Web
- Obits

 

## Editorials

# Poverty standards short-changing California's seniors

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The hardships faced by many American senior citizens are numerous and well-documented: Low fixed incomes, declining health, isolation, loneliness and diminished independence are among the most evident and common.

A new study on the elderly in California illustrates just how tough they have it: The cost of living in this state is more than double the federal poverty level, a measuring stick used by many government agencies to calculate financial support for seniors who depend on some form of public aid.

This out-of-touch standard should be sent into retirement and replaced with one firmly rooted in reality.

UCLA's Center for Health Policy Research and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development reported Tuesday that nearly 1.8 million Californians over 65 were unable to afford their basic needs in 2007 even though only 8 percent of them had incomes that fell below the federal poverty level.

The organizations, however, fed their data through an alternative measuring system called the Elder Index, which takes into account far more expense factors than the federal poverty level benchmark, which is based only on the cost of food. The Elder Index also weighs the cost of housing, medical care and transportation to sketch a more realistic picture of older folks' struggle to survive in a state where just about everything costs more.

Take housing. According to the report, single renters in 2009 required an average of \$21,763 per year, twice the \$10,830 established by the federal poverty standard. Couples who rented needed more than \$30,000 -- again, double the federal mark.

In Kern County, where housing costs are considered low in comparison to the coastal metropolitan regions, single renters needed about \$17,000 per year -- still well above the federal standard. In the Bay Area's San Mateo County, they needed nearly \$28,000. More than 40 percent of California's low-income seniors rent, whereas the national average is 29 percent.

Though the federal poverty benchmark is demonstrably outdated and inaccurate, leaders in Sacramento have been slow to get with the times. According to sentinel agency California Watch, a bill requiring state agencies to switch to the Elder Index was vetoed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Yet there's some good news in the report: Though most federal and state welfare agencies use the federal poverty level to figure eligibility, many service providers and officials are starting to embrace the Elder Index as they lobby for public resources -- more than 60 percent of area agencies on aging in California use it, for example.

In Los Angeles, the National Council on Aging, the Insight Center and city and county governments are about to launch an index-based demonstration project to match seniors with services.

And that vetoed Elder Index bill has gained new life. It's been sent to the state Senate for consideration.

Recession, budget cuts, pension wars and stock market losses are seriously straining the system upon which many seniors rely. Their numbers are going to grow by the millions in the next two decades, making decisive and practical action that much more urgent.

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Ironically this editorial seems to conflict with this news story from USA Today --  
"Despite recession, seniors see income gains"

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2010-09-17-1Aincome17\\_ST\\_N.htm?plckFindCommentKey=CommentKey:68ed324f-d49b-4179-848d-0cd647bf4e02](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2010-09-17-1Aincome17_ST_N.htm?plckFindCommentKey=CommentKey:68ed324f-d49b-4179-848d-0cd647bf4e02)

First sentence in article -- Senior citizens are enjoying some of the biggest income gains in decades at a time when every other age group is losing ground in the recession, the Census Bureau reported Thursday.

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