TheReporter.Com

Bay Area seniors struggle to make ends meet

By Matt O'Brien/Contra Costa Times

Posted: 02/24/2009 01:00:59 AM PST

Hattie Griffin does not consider herself poor, and neither does the federal government.

But her latest years have been the most difficult of a long lifetime. She is one of almost half of all East Bay seniors having trouble making ends meet, according to a new way of measuring economic insecurity in California.

After refinancing the Pittsburg house she has lived in since 1953, the 78-year-old faced unexpected health problems and struggled to make ballooning payments.

"They just let me keep financing it; they knew how much I made a month," said Griffin. "Then, when I got sick, and had to use what I had to take care of my medical and medicine and all that, I had to drop behind."

A month behind in her $1,200 monthly mortgage, the retired nurse fears she could lose the home she has had for 55 years.

There are nearly 120,000 East Bay residents, and more than a million seniors statewide, who fall below the new "California Elder Economic Security Standard," developed by an Oakland nonprofit in partnership with the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. In the Napa-Solano area, grouped together statistically by researchers, there are some 27,000.

Most, like Griffin, do not have a low enough income to dip below the federal poverty line, but they are so burdened by Bay Area housing, health care, food and other costs that they are having a tough time keeping up with paying for necessities.

"We were surprised at the starkly high number of seniors unable to cover the basics," said Susan Smith, director of Californians for Economic Security, a project of the Oakland-based Insight Center for Community Economic Development. "We're not talking about 1 million people doing something wrong. We're talking about more systemic issues at hand."

Smith said the official federal poverty index, which determines how government help is allocated, depends on a 50-year-old methodology that is no longer an adequate measurement and does not account for regional differences in the cost of living.

To be considered poor, a person living alone must make less than $10,210 a year, no matter where in the country the person lives. About 7 percent of Alameda County seniors and 5 percent of Contra Costa County seniors are classified as poor. In the Napa-Solano area, about 8 percent are classified as poor.

But far more, said Smith, are struggling: about 49 percent of Alameda County seniors; 42 percent in Contra Costa County and 46 percent in Napa-Solano.

To calculate what exactly it means to be struggling, the center measured not just income but also basic monthly expenses, based on geography and other factors. In Alameda County, for instance, the average senior who lives alone in a rented home would pay $2,096 monthly on basic expenses including rent, food, transportation and health care.

"I don't expect to be rich," said Peoria Lewis, 72, who ekes out a living on her railroad company

TheReporter.Com

pension and has rented a North Oakland apartment for 20 years. "But I would like to live in relative comfort, not have to worry day to day if I have to rob Peter to pay Paul."

Fellow Oakland resident Hussain Sayfuddiyn, 68, said he was fine with being a "starving artist" in his younger days, depending on a succession of paralegal jobs to pay the rent while he wrote poetry. But he became legally blind five years ago, and life on $756 a month in Social Security income has been tough.

He moved into government-subsidized housing recently, saving significantly on costs, he said. His next biggest expense is food, which costs him about $150 monthly, he said. "I try not to waste money because the worst thing to do is waste money , " Sayfuddiyn said. "If you don't have any to spare, and you waste it, you're going to always be down. I try to keep my spending in control for things I really need."

Worst off, according to the index, were those with a mortgage, followed by renters. Those who have paid off their mortgages are the least likely to be economically insecure, Smith said.

"Housing drives your costs in California, so if you were lucky enough to buy 30 years ago, and didn't have to refinance to send your kids to college, your costs are going to be significantly lower," Smith said.

Also worse off were women living alone and African Americans, who were likely to have made less during their working years than male and white counterparts; as well as older, recently arrived immigrants less likely to have pensions or qualify for government benefits.

Reporter staff contributed to this report.

Ninety-nine percent of Latino seniors in Contra Costa and 79 percent of Latino seniors in Alameda County fell below the economic security standard, along with 72 percent of Asian seniors in Alameda County.

Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, plans to introduce new legislation today that would require the state to begin using the newly designed index so as to better understand how seniors are faring.

"They're kind of the quiet ones, because people assume that the two programs adopted in the 1960s (Medicare and Social Security) are adequate," Beall said.

He said there has been growing recognition that the federal poverty index is not a sophisticated enough methodology.

In New York City last year, Mayor Michael Bloomberg was one of the first to reformulate 1960s-era poverty measures to account for more relevant factors, such as the costs of utilities and housing.

Neither the governor, nor the state Department of Aging, nor any of its county affiliates have yet voiced support or opposition to the new index, but Victoria Tolbert, division director of Alameda County Adult and Aging Services, said there is wide support among those who work with the seniors for better techniques to measure their economic health.

"We're hoping that this information will trickle up so that the state uses it consistently," Tolbert said. "I don't think there's any disagreement that the federal poverty line is outdated. The question, then, is how do we correct it."