

Bay State Seniors Struggle To Get By

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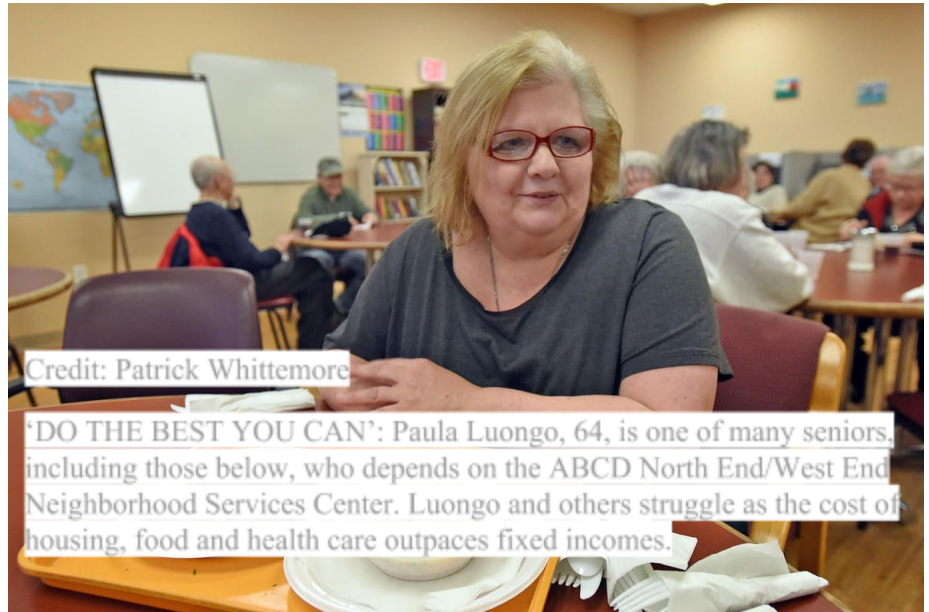
More than half of **Bay State seniors** are struggling **to** pay for housing, food and health care as the cost of living in Massachusetts continues **to** surge, a troubling trend that has elder advocates calling for legislation aimed at ensuring that older residents who worked their whole lives aren't falling through the cracks.

At the ABCD North End/West End Neighborhood Services Center, an institution many Hub **seniors** depend on for critical services, 72-year-old Vincenza Ciampa said she “worries about everything.”

“I go **to** the grocery store. I see people with all these bags and I only have a couple of things,” Ciampa said. “I feel so embarrassed.”

Paula Luongo, 64, said she and many of the other **seniors** who rely on the center are fighting a daily battle **to** make ends meet. “With the cost of living and everything going up, you have **to** do the best you can,” she said. “I think they should help the elderly more. It’s a shame.”

The Bay State has the second-largest population of elderly residents who are scraping to get by, second only to Mississippi, according to the 2016 Elder Economic Security



Standard Index, which was compiled by UMass Boston professor Jan Mutchler. And though the index shows our local elders are having a harder time than most, it also highlights that the issue is widespread — with an average of 53 percent of older adults who live alone falling into poverty or already living in it.

The sobering figures were released as city officials are preparing to release a three-year plan aimed at making Boston more age-friendly and exploring how best to assist older residents with housing, transportation, social activities and health care, according to Elder Affairs Commissioner

Emily Shea. That report is expected over the next few months, she said.

Mutchler, who serves as director of UMass Boston’s Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging, said the difficulties seniors face can be attributed to a range of factors.

“People are living on few sources of income,” she said. “A lot don’t have pensions. A lot are widows. A lot are single women who were relying on their husbands who passed away.”

Massachusetts Senior Action Council Executive Director Carolyn Villers agreed.

“I think Social Security is the core of what a lot of people rely on, but it hasn’t kept pace,” she said. “Pensions have been cut back. Expenses have gone up much faster and the cost of housing and health care are particularly challenging for folks.”

In the hopes of reversing the troubling trend, the American Association of Retired Persons is spearheading an effort to lobby congressional leaders from coast to coast to protect Social Security and Medicare benefits, according to AARP Massachusetts director Michael Festa.

“Every delegation in the country has been contacted,” Festa said. “We’re encouraging members all around the country to visit their Congress people and deliver the message that Medicare needs to be protected.”

And the fight to make changes at the state level is being led by the recently formed Coalition for Elder Economic Security, a group of Bay State elder advocacy organizations, including the AARP and the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, that is lobbying for a handful of policy proposals — including a push to up the asset limit for seniors to qualify for MassHealth, increasing income eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program, and creating a common application for benefit programs.

At the ABCD North End/ West End Neighborhood Services Center, the need for these changes is on display every day, director Maria Stella Gulla said.

“It’s heartbreaking to see them struggle and to know these are people who built this community and worked all their lives,” she said. “They deserve a dignified lifestyle in their later years.”

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