

Jewish Delegate Assembly of Greater Pittsburgh Policy Statement on Senior Poverty

Older Americans who are living in poverty often suffer in silence, living in the shadows while trying to make ends meet. A single life change—a costly illness, loss of a job, or death of a spouse—can quickly threaten the financial stability of seniors. This has become especially true during the most recent recession.

In 2008 the poverty rate for older Americans was 9.7%. Higher poverty rates exist for subgroups of older adults, such as women (21.6%), Hispanics (21.6%), African Americans (22.8%), Asians (25.3%), and those over the age of 80 (22.7%). The challenges associated with poverty are even grimmer for those who are widowed, living alone, or in poor health. Approximately two million Older Americans who are 65 years of age and older with limited income and financial resources are eligible to receive SSI (Supplemental Security Income); however, the monthly SSI benefit is below the federal poverty line.

Nearly 6 million older low-income Americans face food insecurity. Seniors living in a food insecure household have trouble providing regular, nutritious meals at times throughout the year. Even though there are a number of food assistance programs that could help seniors suffering from hunger, studies have found that significant numbers of older Americans do not access these programs on a regular basis. There are a number of different reasons older Americans don't access SNAP or other assistance programs (including food pantries and meal delivery services). They may be unaware of potential eligibility or do not know where or how to apply. They are discouraged by the complex application process.

The means for caring for older Americans is another significant issue facing seniors and their families. According to the AARP Foundation, 30 million households in the U.S. provide care for adults over the age of 50. This number is expected to double over the next 25 years with the aging of the Baby Boomer generation. The Jewish community is one of the fastest aging demographics in America, making it even more important that certain support systems and programs be put in to place in order to aid this segment of the population.

There is also a special concern for the rapidly aging Holocaust survivor community. There are special concerns for Holocaust survivors whose average age is 79 with a quarter of survivors, 85 and older in the United States. Besides being more likely to experience poverty than other older Americans, this community has unique issues that require special attention in regards to housing, food, healthcare, and mental health services.

The Jewish Delegate Assembly of Greater Pittsburgh believes that:

- Older Americans should live a life of dignity, free from having to struggle in isolation with the challenges of poverty, hunger, homelessness, illness, and vulnerability.
- No Americans, and especially no older Americans, should be forced to choose between essential needs like food, safe and affordable housing, heating, and medical care.
- It is important to improve the quality of lives for older Americans and improve the care provided to them through family caregivers and networks of service providers.
- Additional supports to assist caregivers and those they serve should be provided through legislation and community programs including volunteer programs linking seniors to seniors, as well as cross generational programs.

- Holocaust survivors deserve particular consideration due to the higher risks they face for poverty, isolation, physical and mental illness, homelessness, and hunger.
- The successful initiation and maintenance of naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) serves as a catalyst for financial participation by housing sponsors, provider agencies, local philanthropists and the communities themselves. Funding to help sustain seniors at home as they age and provide them with the support services that they need should be increased. This funding, needs to cover all aspects of support for seniors including affordable assisted housing, affordable and appropriate transportation, healthcare including psychological, dental, vision and hearing services, nutrition, home energy, socialization services, and financial support. Additionally, the funding should encourage the development and deployment of appropriate assistive technologies that facilitate seniors remaining at home and independent as long as possible. The funding should encourage participation by all stakeholders: seniors, their families, their caregivers, housing sponsors, provider agencies, local philanthropists and the community.

The Community Relations Council should:

- Advocate for robust funding of anti-poverty and service delivery programs at the local, state, and federal level that properly benefit older Americans, particularly those in high-risk categories.
- Advocate for effective outreach programs to ensure access to housing, healthcare, dental care nutrition, home energy, and financial assistance, as well as other human needs programs.
- Actively promote programs to decrease isolation, provide for basic social needs of seniors, and foster opportunities for community-based integration.
- Participate in coalitions around advocacy and service delivery that promote providing assistance to low income older Americans.
- Advocate for robust assistance needed for Holocaust survivors.
- Educate the field and raise awareness about the challenges associated with senior poverty and the opportunities to address these challenges. It is critical that all stakeholders, including policy makers, providers, seniors themselves, and families understand the challenges and are open to advocating for and supporting appropriate solutions.
- Advocate for funding of naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) and to expand services that will enable seniors to remain in their own homes as they age, and provide services, including supportive technology, and support to them, their caregivers and families.
- Advocate for efforts to support assistance to family caregivers as well as efforts to expand in-home trained and reasonably compensated professional caregiver opportunities.
- Advocate for efforts to ensure nutritious age appropriate food for low-income seniors.
- Advocate for the enforcement of existing laws and support policies that end discrimination of seniors in the job market and workplace.