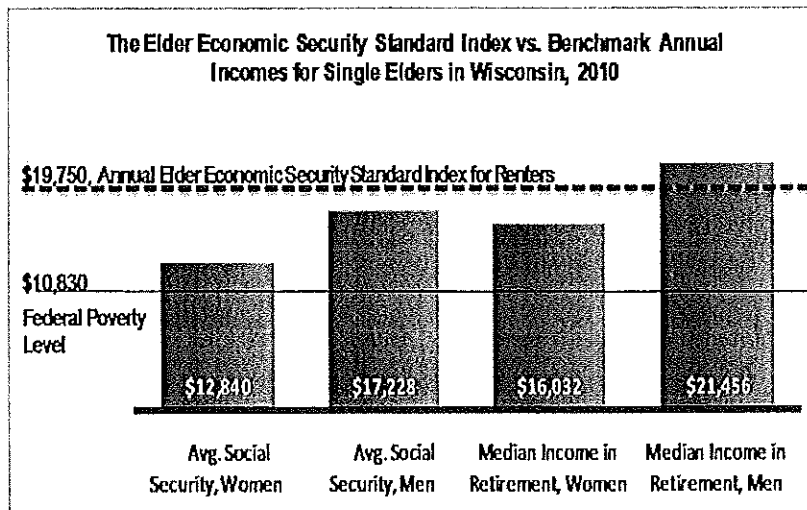




THE WISCONSIN ELDER ECONOMIC SECURITY INITIATIVE™ CHALLENGES FACING AGING POPULATIONS FOCUS ON LGBT ELDERS

The Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index measures income adequacy in relation to basic costs of living and aging in place for elder households. It takes into account the specific circumstances of elder households, including household size, homeowner or renter status, health status and the need for long-term care. Although many elders struggle to make ends meet, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders are more likely to experience a significant gap between income and living expenses, and discrimination that prevents them from aging in dignity.



Note: Income in retirement includes all personal income, other than public supports, of those without earnings. Sources: US Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey PUMS data. Median income values inflated using BLS CPI inflator. Social Security Administration, OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County, 2008. Average Social Security values inflated using SSA COLAs.

In 2005 in Wisconsin, there were 160,698 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals and only 4% of same sex couples had at least one partner over the age of 65.ⁱ Although the average age of LGBT individuals, single or coupled, is younger than of heterosexualsⁱⁱ, they will have unique needs and challenges as they age. Therefore, understanding and anticipating the specific struggles for LGBT individuals and couples, now and during old age, can contribute to improving their well-being throughout their life span.

Legal Status and Recognition

Elderly LGBT individuals and couples are faced with unique challenges due to long-standing institutionalized discrimination against the LGBT community.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the most significant forms of discrimination is the prohibition of same-sex marriage. Where marriage between same sex individuals is illegal and not recognized by the state, and a gay, lesbian, or bisexual senior dies, his or her partner:

- Faces financial loss that can amount to tens of thousands of dollars, because the couple was not recognized as legally married.^{iv}
- Despite having paid taxes throughout their lifetime at the same rate as other Americans, is denied the Social Security survivor benefits that are made available to all married couples.^v

- Is taxed on any retirement plan – 401(k) or IRA – they inherit from their partners, although married spouses can inherit these plans tax-free.^{vi}
- Is charged an estate tax on the inheritance of a home, even if it was jointly owned – a tax that would not apply to married spouses.^{vii}

For transgender individuals, there may be some different issues:

- Coming out or discovery of transgender identity in the workplace may result in lay-offs or a hostile environment, which can affect their income and as such their financial security.^{viii} This can affect the amount of savings or pension of a transgender individual upon retirement.
- Society’s rigid gender binary of female/male can be problematic for transgender individuals when filling out papers for obtaining housing or long term health care services.^{ix} An unrecognized, possibly complex gender identity can therefore significantly impact a transgender individual’s ability to age in dignity.

In Wisconsin, marriages and civil unions between same-sex couples are constitutionally banned. Domestic partnerships are accessible to same-sex couples but legal protections are limited; domestic partnership only provides some state-level protections but does not include federal protections, such as Social Security.

Financial Security

- The national rate of poverty for elderly heterosexual couples is 4.6 percent, while for elderly same-sex couples the percentage is 4.9 for men and 9.1 for women.^x
- The national annual Social Security income for elderly heterosexual couples is \$17,176, while for elderly same-sex couples Social Security income averages \$14,116 for men (17.8 percent less) and \$11,764 for women (31.5 percent less).^{xi} In Wisconsin, the average Social Security benefit for elderly couples in 2010 was \$24,674 per year, while the average Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Index for home renting couples estimates actual annual living expenses at \$28,934 per year.^{xii} This means that the Social Security income covers only 48 percent of expenses for gay couples, and 40 percent of expenses for lesbian couples.
- The average household income of same-sex couples in Wisconsin is \$65,857, less than the average of \$70,074 for heterosexual married couples.^{xiii} On average, men in same-sex couples in Wisconsin earn \$36,774 each year, significantly less than \$46,404 for married men. Women in same-sex couples earn an average of \$29,860 per year, which is more than married women, whose earnings average \$24,002, but still less than male couples.^{xiv} Lower income throughout a lifetime can greatly impact the ability to make ends meet in old age, as the amount of savings and pensions are likely to be lower upon retirement.

Significant Gap Between Income and Expenses for Elders

Average Social Security Income: \$15,035 for an individual, \$24,674 for a couple

Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index Per Year					
Elder Person			Elder Couple		
Owner w/o Mortgage	Renter, one bedroom	Owner w/ mortgage	Owner w/o Mortgage	Renter, one bedroom	Owner w/ mortgage
\$18,659	\$19,750	\$26,439	\$28,934	\$30,025	\$36,714

Source: Wider Opportunities for Women and the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, *The Elder Economic Security Standard Index for Wisconsin* (Washington, DC: Wider Opportunities for Women, 2008).

Housing

In addition to estate tax on home inheritance, LGBT elders also face other specific hardships with regards to housing:

- In Wisconsin, 62% of same-sex couples own their home, compared to 86% of married couples.^{xy} Same-sex senior couples are more likely than married heterosexual couples to still be making mortgage payments on their home.^{xvi} 18% of Wisconsin seniors with mortgages will pay almost three times more for housing than elders who paid off their mortgages.^{xvii} A disproportionate percentage of same-sex senior couples will thus have higher housing costs than married senior couples.
- This higher debt burden, combined with the financial losses that stem from being unmarried, means that surviving partners may also be at greater risk of losing their homes upon the death of a partner than surviving heterosexual spouses.^{xviii}
- Surviving partners whose name does not appear on the title of the home the couple lived in are at risk of being forced out by the deceased partners' next of kin who may claim ownership – a risk no surviving spouse would face under any circumstances.^{xix}
- Gay, lesbian and bisexual seniors also are at significant risk of losing their home when an elderly partner enters a nursing home. This is because federal Medicaid law permits a married spouse to remain in the couple's home when a husband or wife enters a nursing home – but it does not grant unmarried couples the same right.^{xx}

Furthermore, when LGBT seniors need to turn to others for housing assistance, they often face three challenges:

- Lack of family help: while heterosexual seniors often rely on their spouses or children to help them, many LGBT seniors find themselves isolated and without either resource.^{xxi}
- A shortage of welcoming housing: partially due to a lack of family support, LGBT elders are in greater need of assisted housing but have difficulty finding affordable and welcoming housing within their own community close to friends and other loved ones.^{xxii}
- Fear of discrimination and harassment: the major struggle that older LGBT men have in long-term care facilities is the need to remain closeted out of fear of discrimination and harassment.^{xxiii}

Health Care

- Medicaid regulations allow married heterosexual couples to apply as a couple for its program, and protect the assets and homes of married spouses when the other spouse enters a nursing home or long-term care facility. No such protections are offered to same-sex partners: an LGBT elder in a committed relationship must still apply for Medicaid coverage of long-term care as a single person,^{xxiv} and spousal impoverishment protections do not apply to same-sex couples.^{xxv}
- Hospital visitation or the right to die in the same nursing home is regularly denied to same-sex partners.^{xxvi}
- For LGBT seniors, obtaining health care services may be difficult due to their fear of coming out to their physician or lack of appropriate treatment by the medical establishment. They may therefore choose not to see doctor for preventative or medical care.^{xxvii}
- For transgender elders, the normative problems of aging are compounded by the consequences of the hormones and surgeries needed for gender reassignment. Although these effects are under-researched, they likely have some effect on transgender individuals' physical and mental health.^{xxviii}

Conclusion

The discrimination and isolation LGBT seniors encounter exacerbate the struggles many elders face. Especially where gay marriage is illegal, they receive fewer social benefits, which negatively affect their ability to make ends meet. Furthermore, barriers to adequate housing and health care, as well as to family and community support, significantly compromise the well-being of LGBT elders.

To learn more about the WI Elder Economic Security Standard Index, visit the Wisconsin Women's Network at: www.wiwomensnetwork.org
Contact us at: info@wiwomensnetwork.org or 608-255-9809

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ⁱ "Wisconsin Census Snapshot LGBT", 2007 (The Williams Institute, www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/.../WisconsinCensusSnapshot.pdf)

ⁱⁱ "Wisconsin Census Snapshot LGBT", 2007 (The Williams Institute, www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/.../WisconsinCensusSnapshot.pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Aging", 2009 (National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, <http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/aging>)

^{iv} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^v "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

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^{vii} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^{viii} "Transgender Aging: The Graying of Transgender", 2006 (American Public Health Association, <http://www.apha.org/membersgroups/newsletters/sectionnewsletters/geron/winter06/2560.htm>)

^{ix} "Transgender Aging: The Graying of Transgender", 2006 (American Public Health Association, <http://www.apha.org/membersgroups/newsletters/sectionnewsletters/geron/winter06/2560.htm>)

^x "Improving the lives of LGBT Older Adults", 2010 p.3 (LGTB Movement Advancement Project, www.lgbtmap.org/file/advancing-equality-for-lgbt-elders.pdf)

^{xi} "Improving the lives of LGBT Older Adults", 2010 p.3 (LGTB Movement Advancement Project, www.lgbtmap.org/file/advancing-equality-for-lgbt-elders.pdf)

^{xii} The Elder Economic Security Standard Index for Wisconsin, 2010

^{xiii} "Wisconsin Census Snapshot LGBT", 2007 (The Williams Institute, www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/.../WisconsinCensusSnapshot.pdf)

^{xiv} "Wisconsin Census Snapshot LGBT", 2007 (The Williams Institute, www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/.../WisconsinCensusSnapshot.pdf)

^{xv} "Wisconsin Census Snapshot LGBT", 2007 (The Williams Institute, www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/.../WisconsinCensusSnapshot.pdf)

^{xvi} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^{xvii} Elders living on the Edge: When meeting basic needs exceeds available income in Wisconsin, 2008 p. 3

^{xviii} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^{xix} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^{xx} "The cost of Marriage Inequality to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Seniors: A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report", 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org/about_us/7055.htm)

^{xxi} "Unique Housing Challenges for Seniors", 2010 (Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/aging/5348.htm>)

^{xxii} "Unique Housing Challenges for Seniors", 2010 (Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/aging/5348.htm>)

^{xxiii} "Unique Housing Challenges for Seniors", 2010 (Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/aging/5348.htm>)

^{xxiv} "Improving the lives of LGBT Older Adults", 2010 p.3 (LGTB Movement Advancement Project, www.lgbtmap.org/file/advancing-equality-for-lgbt-elders.pdf)

^{xxv} "Aging", 2009 (National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, <http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/aging>)

^{xxvi} "Aging", 2009 (National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, <http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/aging>)

^{xxvii} "Transgender Aging: The Graying of Transgender", 2006 (American Public Health Association, <http://www.apha.org/membersgroups/newsletters/sectionnewsletters/geron/winter06/2560.htm>)

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