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**It Makes You Want to Cry: Economy Hits Seniors Hard  
Left Margin  
By Carl Bloice**

**BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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He caught me by the elevator. "Do you know how much peanut butter costs at Safeway now as compared to two months ago?" John asked. I didn't but I had been aware of the recent cost of berries, which were rising out of sight. Joe wanted to know if I had, as requested, written to one of our U.S. senators about the problem. He told me that across the bay in Oakland, a senior meals program had been eliminated entirely as of this month. What brought this exchange on was a July 1 *Associated Press* article on the effects of rising food and fuel prices and budgetary cutbacks on older people. John and I belong to the same local senior activist group and I had emailed the story to members of the board. That's the story quoting a woman on Social Security and her difficulty meeting the rising cost of food and utilities who said, "A lot of times I can't even get into the kitchen."

"Those same costs are squeezing the estimated 20,000 senior nutrition programs across the country that serve Jones and millions of elderly and frail Americans" the *AP* story read. "While most needs are still being met, advocates from California to New York worry that seniors will go hungry. They blame a nearly 20 percent increase in fuel and food prices over the past year, flat or reduced government funding, and an ailing economy that yields fewer donations."

Meanwhile, *USA Today* has run an extensive series on the problems of seniors struggle to remain alive and healthy under the crushing weight of the cost of the things we need and for which the elderly must pay a disproportionate share of our incomes on. One of them described a busy food bank in Southern California. "The free food amounts to a lifeline for these seniors, who have seen inflation wring much of the value out of their fixed incomes," it read. "For these retirees, the prices of essentials - notably, gas and food - have galloped beyond reach. Perhaps most of all, they're straining under the weight of crushing medical costs.

"Nearly all Americans have felt the sting of inflation in recent months. But when you're retired and your sole means of support is a fixed amount that arrives each month - from Social Security and, for the lucky ones, a pension - the pain is especially severe.

"Until recently, many retirees had assumed they had enough income to retire on. That was before gas and food prices began racing out of control."

Then last Saturday, the seniors' plight made the front page of the *New York Times*. "Faced with soaring gasoline prices, agencies around the country that provide services to the elderly say they are having to cut back on programs like Meals on Wheels, transportation assistance and home care, especially in rural areas that depend on volunteers who provide their own gas. In a recent survey by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, more than half said they had already cut back on programs because of gas costs, and 90 percent said they expected to make cuts in the 2009 fiscal year."

"Public agencies of all kinds are struggling with the new math of higher gas prices, lower property and sales tax revenues and increases in the minimum wage, noted the *Times* story, adding, "But older poor people and those who are homebound are doubly squeezed by rising gas and food prices because they rely not just on social service agencies, but also on volunteers."

When I forwarded that story Saturday morning, another senior group board member responded within minutes, "It makes you want to cry."

That the national media has taken notice of seniors' special plight amid the deepening economic crisis is to be welcomed. I cite the articles because not everybody will see them. They do confirm and put an added sense of urgency to something most of us are aware of in any case. You don't have to travel far from home to hear stories of the working class elderly trying to cope in trying times.

Nancy Wilson, program manager of Meals on Wheels in Great Falls, Montana told the *Great Falls Tribune* the program usually sees a decline in demand during the summer, but not this year. Citing rising food prices as the reason, she said, "The seniors are probably the ones most hurt by this because they're on such a fixed income," Wilson said. The program's menu is being modified, said the report, and some items, like bread, eliminated because they are too expensive. "A local resident donates money so wheat bread can be served once a week," the *Tribune* reported.

Bread isn't the only Meals on Wheels scarcity these days. Drivers are needed, too. During the summer, volunteer drivers deliver the meals and supply their own cars and gas.

Randy Barrett, director of Cascade County Aging Services, which oversees Meals on Wheels, told the *Tribune* he's worried about how some seniors will be able to afford home heating when winter comes. "If you're on a fixed income, you're on a fixed

income," he said.

It's not just that food banks and nutrition programs are being cut back; it's also that this is occurring at a time when the need for them is increasing. Seniors are today being hit hard from a number of directions.

It starts at the top. While the cost of waging war abroad continues to soar, the Bush Administration and the all-too-ready-to-compromise Congress are taking steps to reduce expenditures on social services across the board, even as the need for them grows. Meanwhile, under the impact of declining tax revenues – much attributed to the housing mortgage crisis - and increasing costs, states, cities and counties are cutting back on a range of senior services and health related programs.

Then there is the mortgage crisis itself.

A lot of people who are no longer in the workforce have relied on what they had built up in their home equity to guarantee them a relatively secure retirement. For many that assurance has now flown out the window in the face of the downward cascade in home prices. Many are stuck with houses that are worth less than the mortgages held on them and a hundreds of thousands are facing the threat of bank foreclosures.

According to the government, women and men over 55 have the highest rate of home ownership – about 80 percent.

"We are looking at a generation approaching retirement that has taken a very hard hit. They counted on the equity in their homes and it is not going to be there," Dean Baker, co-director at the Center for Economic Policy and Research, said recently.

There is the rising cost of healthcare, a particularly hard row to hoe for seniors, even for those on Medicare. It still costs, and too often there is a conflict between paying the medical bills, heating the house and eating. "I have one friend that really bothers me." Frankie Zirkle of Springfield, Mo. told *Ozarks.com*. "She gets her medicine one month, her husband has his medicine the next month and one month each one of them does without their medicine and... in America it shouldn't be that way."


No, it shouldn't. Keep in mind that this tragedy is happening in the wealthiest nation on the planet. There are ample resources to prevent it entirely and quickly. Today, vast fortunes are being amassed by those on top and wealth disparities grow. The 2008 election campaign lumbers on, spending a lot of time talking about things that are mostly inconsequential in the larger scheme of things. Meanwhile, many seniors – somebody's moms or dads – are finding it difficult to secure food and services and are facing the possibility of shivering through the winter, No, it shouldn't be this way.


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