



California Commission on Aging Hosted Forum to Discuss Critical Issues Facing Aging Adults

(Los Angeles, CA) – This week, the California Commission on Aging (CCoA) hosted the 2019 *Elder Economic Forum: Political, Economic, and Demographic Impacts on Retirement*. Our state is striving to meet the increasingly urgent needs of our aging population and many are unable to retire or thrive on their fixed incomes. Consequently, older adults often face financial insecurity, poverty, isolation, and homelessness. This forum explored state and local efforts to address this urgent crisis.

According to Nari Rhee, Director of the Retirement Security Program at UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, most households have not accumulated the resources they will need to retire. “While the top 10% of households have been gaining wealth, 3 out of 4 low-income workers have absolutely no retirement savings.” And there is a wide racial wealth gap: the median net wealth of white households in 2016 was more than five times higher than that of Latino households, and more than seven times that of Black households.

Steve Wallace, Associate Director at the UCLA Center for Health Policy and Research, pointed out that federal metrics defining poverty and setting the threshold for public assistance are simply inadequate, especially in Los Angeles. “There is a large group of people we call ‘Tweeners.’ These are people who do not have enough money to pay for their daily needs, but they have just a little too much money to qualify for government programs.”

Housing remains a major economic challenge for many people. In places throughout California, over 50% of seniors are severely rent burdened, meaning they spend more than half their income on rent. The high cost of rent coupled with low incomes and other financial insecurities make older people particularly vulnerable to displacement and relocation. “If you are constantly moving, then you have weaker social networks, are more isolated from friends, and are likely to face disruption in your health care services,” said Wallace.

Seniors are the fastest growing part of the homeless population in some parts of the state. In Los Angeles, senior homelessness increased by twenty-two percent in 2018. Sarah Dusseault, Chair of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, says, “We predict that close to 55,000 people became homeless last year in Los Angeles County. Many of those were over 50 years old and experiencing homelessness for their first time.”

Yesterday’s forum highlighted innovative solutions to this growing problem, including a rent-subsidy pilot project for very low-income seniors in Santa Monica. Using funds from a local tax increase passed by voters in 2016, the Preserve Our Dignity pilot program is helping over 400

seniors stay in their homes. “While building new affordable housing units is also important, this is a highly cost-effective program that is going to help significantly more seniors stay in their long-time homes and meet their basic needs,” said Michael Soloff, Chair of the Santa Monica Housing Commission.

And, this kind of financial insecurity, isolation, and a decline in mental capacities all increase seniors’ risk of being victims of fraud. Internet scams are common: there are 3.4 billion fake emails sent every day. “We are all targeted all the time by scams, but seniors are particularly vulnerable. Not having grown up with the internet is a serious disadvantage,” says Jaime Levine, Director of Legal Services, Elder Law & Advocacy.

The aging population is diverse, and different communities have unique needs. The forum specifically addressed issues faced by LGBTQ seniors.

“There is a myth that because LGBTQ older people in many cases didn’t have kids, that they must be wealthier than heterosexual older people. But in reality, the data shows that LGBTQ elders are actually more likely to grow old in poverty. In addition, the social isolation that often comes as people age without adult children frequently creates vulnerability,” said Michael Adams, CEO of SAGE. Twenty-five percent of LGBTQ older adults have nobody to call in case of an emergency.

“LGBT people have often spent their entire lives facing discrimination. In many cases, the bigotry existed within their own home. Because of this, they are four times more likely than their straight counterparts to live alone and have no family support,” said Lorri L. Jean, CEO of the LA LGBT Center. “LGBT people are more likely to avoid seeking benefits they are entitled to, such as veterans benefits, because they are fearful of facing bigotry.”

This forum builds off the 2016 *Aging, Women and Poverty in California* forum which emphasized the unique needs of aging women. Nearly two thirds of all seniors living in poverty are women. “This reflects the compounded impact of lifelong pay inequity, discrimination, and harassment. We must do more to reduce women’s barriers to economic security in all stages of life,” says Betsy Butler, Chair of CCOA and Executive Director of the California Women’s Law Center.

The expert panelists were clear that addressing the needs of aging adults is increasingly urgent and requires policy solutions. “This kind of widespread economic insecurity represents a failure of our systems, not that individuals have been making the wrong choices,” said Kevin Prindiville, Executive Director of Justice in Aging.

As California grapples with this massive demographic shift, state leaders and policymakers shared their visions for solutions at the forum. State Treasurer Fiona Ma’s office provides loans to retrofit buildings and make them safer and more accessible to older adults so that people can more easily stay in their homes. “My parents and I have lived together for the past 15 years, so I know firsthand the challenges aging adults and family caregivers face,” said California State Treasurer Ma, who worked on a legislative package last year to compliment the state’s Master Plan on Aging.

Kim McCoy Wade, Acting Director at the California Department of Aging, concluded the discussion. “These statistics are sobering, but it’s important to be clear-eyed about the

challenges ahead. A realistic understanding of the issues makes us more effective in finding meaningful solutions. I am encouraged by the commitment of individuals, organizations, and local governments working to improve the quality of life for aging people in our state, and I am eager to collaborate towards this goal,” said McCoy Wade.

Following this forum, a white paper will be produced and made available to the public. The entire program was filmed and will be posted to CCOA’s website. To find these materials and stay informed on these issues, please visit www.CCOA.ca.gov.

SPEAKERS:

Michael Adams, CEO, SAGE

Betsy Butler, Chair, CCoA and Executive Director, California Women’s Law Center

Sarah Dusseault, Chair, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

Lorri L. Jean, CEO, Los Angeles LGBT Center

Jaime Levine, Director of Legal Services, Elder Law & Advocacy

The Honorable Fiona Ma, California State Treasurer

Kevin Prindiville, Executive Director, Justice in Aging

Nari Rhee, Director, Retirement Security Program, UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education

Michael Soloff, Chair, Santa Monica Housing Commission

Kim McCoy Wade, Acting Director, California Department of Aging

Steve Wallace, Associate Director, UCLA Center for Health Policy and Research

Moderator: **Adriene Hill**, Managing Editor, KPCC

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The California Commission on Aging serves as the principal advocate in the state on behalf of older individuals, including, but not limited to, advisory participation in the consideration of all legislation and regulations made by state and federal departments and agencies relating to programs and services that affect older individuals.

For nearly 30 years, the California Women’s Law Center (CWLC) has been a champion in the pursuit of justice for women and girls. CWLC works to break down the barriers and advances the potential of women and girls in California through transformative litigation, policy advocacy, and education. Since 1989, CWLC has advocated for and achieved policy change on a wide range of issues affecting gender discrimination and equality, Title IX enforcement, women’s health and reproductive justice, economic security, and violence against women.