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Holding on for Dear Life

Many Canadian seniors are living on as little as \$15,000 a year. And with the cost of living continuing to rise, a sizable number of them are struggling to make ends meet. But there are agencies ready and willing to help.

By Lisa Bendall

Maria Gruber lives simply. The 68-year-old Montreal-area woman has a small but bright bachelor apartment and her diet includes little more than fruit, bread and cheese. She spends her time tending her apartment and looking after the flowers on her balcony. Gruber has endured a series of mental and physical health problems, but calls herself a strong person. "I always get up and go again," she declares. "I'm lucky that I can do that."

But Gruber has one heartfelt wish: to travel to her homeland. "I still have two girlfriends in Austria," she says wistfully. "I would love to go and visit them."

That wish isn't likely to be fulfilled anytime soon. Gruber (names have been changed to protect privacy) is living on \$15,000 a year. Almost half of that goes to rent, and she buys a few groceries and other essentials with what's left. So a trip to Europe is out. Living frugally, "I do the best I can to do things I like to do," she says.

It goes without saying that Gruber is not the only senior in this country facing financial challenges. Not by far. In fact, 13 per cent of Canadians over the age of 65, or about 575,000, live below the low-income threshold before tax, according to Statistics Canada. That figure spikes to 35 per cent for seniors living alone, like Gruber.

Richard Shillington, a social policy researcher in Manotick, Ont., near Ottawa, says the true number of seniors who struggle financially is higher than people think. "As soon as you become retired, there are so many clawbacks." He says pensioners are often unaware of their eligibility for some benefits. In 2003, the median income for senior couples was under \$37,000, while for single women it was \$18,000. According to Shillington, 82 per cent of older single Canadians live on less than \$20,000.

StatsCan figures show a recent decline in senior poverty. But Shillington notes that the tools for measuring low income have also shifted. The result? Poverty among older Canadians is vastly underestimated.

The introduction of the Canada Pension Plan has made a difference to some households over the past three decades. But many single seniors (most are women) never worked outside the home and have no employer pension. Instead, they're relying on government support, which often isn't enough to bump them over the poverty line. "With the rising cost of everything, people on fixed incomes are suffering," says Fern Haight, secretary of the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation, a self-advocacy group. "I really do believe seniors have the right to age with dignity."

Esther Jones isn't exactly suffering, but that's because she's found ways to stretch her small income, which varies but is usually around \$25,000. Now 69, Jones, of Dartmouth, N.S., was unexpectedly forced into early retirement for health reasons. That

reduced her pension. “I had planned to work until I was 75. But things don’t always work out,” she says. Now Jones rents a flat in someone else’s house, and she shops for most of her clothing and even furniture at second-hand stores. She buys groceries on sale, stocking her freezer when she finds good deals. And she prays this won’t be the year that her 14-year-old car finally bites the dust.

To supplement her income, Jones is working again. She tutors and runs a small business. But it doesn’t bring in much. Her entertainment budget is virtually nil, she says, so she rarely eats out or attends a concert. “I’d love to have a dog, but I’m afraid of vet bills,” Jones adds. “So that’s one of the extras that would be nice, that I just don’t feel I could do.”

Her biggest fear is more health problems. “If I have a little extra, I tuck it away. But it’s not much, and that would be gobbled up in no time if I had a major medical crisis.”

Rising health costs often go hand in hand with aging and can eat up what little disposable income seniors have available. Ottawa’s Adele Poirier, 74, and her husband, Bernard, 80, feel fortunate to have lived in the same house for 43 years. But she says their savings were depleted after Bernard had triple bypass surgery. They both have employer pensions, but the rising cost of utilities means their income must be stretched further every year. “You’re on a fixed income, but, son of a gun, everything goes up,” Poirier says. “My pension never moves. The hydro has gone sky-high and the water bill has gone sky-high.”

Property taxes, too, have increased significantly. Yet with their annual gross income of \$36,000, the Poiriers can’t qualify for the City of Ottawa’s property tax deferral program for low-income seniors. It’s reserved for those making under \$30,000. Poirier got the same message when she applied for a snow-clearing service for seniors. “They said, ‘You make too much money,’” says Poirier, who last winter wasn’t able to shovel the snow herself because she had her own bypass surgery in September 2007. And she says the accessible transit service won’t come to their door unless the snow is cleared. In the end, she shelled out for some local kids to shovel the snow.

“I have never asked for help before. Never, never, never,” Poirier insists. “We’re very proud.”

Amanda Macrae, CEO of Age & Opportunity, a senior-serving agency in Winnipeg, says a lot of seniors are, like Poirier, still in their homes but cash-strapped after paying for upkeep. “I think we need to be careful about optics. People might think, ‘Oh, this person is living in a nice home.’ But she may be house-poor,” Macrae points out. “There are folks living next door to you and me who may be struggling.”

Geography can exacerbate the problem. Not only do seniors in urban centres face steeper property taxes, but Macrae says they’re also often paying more for basic necessities. “You’re not going to have a superstore where you can buy milk at an affordable price. You’re buying milk marked up 50 percent because you live in a neighbourhood with convenience stores.”

On the flip side, suburban seniors are often isolated. “Transportation is a huge issue,” notes Hélène McGregor, assistant director at West Island Citizen Advocacy in Pointe-

Claire, Que. For someone who can't drive and has little change to spare, just taking a taxi to a doctor's appointment or grocery store might be prohibitive.

In an assisted-living facility like the place that Jean Dixon, 92, calls home in Edmonton, these little fees mount quickly. She's legally blind and can't get out on her own. But bringing an escort from the building costs \$15 an hour – rounded up to the next hour. At one point, Dixon had to pay if she wanted her dinner brought to her room on a tray instead of going to the dining room. "They charge extra for every single thing," she says. She's frustrated that her rent is raised each year while her pension stays the same. "This is the kind of thing that breaks your back."

Dixon watches her pennies. "I don't spend very much money," she concedes. "I don't buy clothes. I'm wearing stuff I had 20 years ago." But she frets about finances all the same. "I think that my biggest worries are the things that keep going up and going up and going up."

Are there steps that seniors in these situations can take to help themselves? One of the most important things older folks can do is find out about services in their community. Local agencies and programs may offer volunteer drivers or shuttle buses, deliver nutritious meals at a low cost or help with preparing wills or income tax returns. And not all services are income-tested, McGregor says. "It is often very worthwhile phoning them." Even if the senior-serving agency you call can't help you, often its staff can refer you to someplace that can.

Linking to an advocacy organization like the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation is also invaluable because you'll learn more about resources and self-help tips. One advantage of staying in the loop: You may find out you're eligible for income support you didn't know about. Shillington points out that thousands of seniors haven't applied for basic support like Old Age Security, the Guaranteed Income Supplement and the Canada Pension Plan. He knows of a woman who didn't find out until her 90s that she could have been receiving CPP for the past three decades. "There's a significant problem with awareness of the benefits people are entitled to," Shillington says.

In fact, understanding your own finances can sometimes spell the difference of thousands of dollars to your income. Moves such as cashing in RRSPs or splitting pensions on income tax can leave you worse off, so it's important to learn about the implications of these choices. Shillington notes that many older widows may never have been involved in the family finances and they struggle with a steep learning curve.

Sometimes the path to keeping costs down is an indirect one. Just staying active and developing a social network can have a financial impact. "If you're more engaged in your community, you're going to be healthier longer," says Macrae. "This will help you stay independent longer and therefore not have to expend a lot of money supporting yourself." These social connections can also translate into volunteers to shovel your snow or drive you to the pharmacy.

McGregor agrees that community ties are important, especially as the younger generation becomes less available for support. "We have seniors calling us who have three or four kids, but everybody's too busy. They've got work and they've got their own kids," she says. "The community is picking up the slack."

What's critical, Fern Haight says, is to be vocal about your need for help. "Do not hide it," she says. "People need to let their MPs and provincial representatives know what their situation is. It is nothing to be ashamed of because it is no fault of the senior. It is mostly due to circumstances and the economy. Keep writing and calling until you get some relief. Never give up." She adds, "Seniors are the pioneers of this country, the very backbone. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

"No senior should be hungry or homeless in this land of plenty."

RESOURCES

National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation

Art Field, President

705-786-2778

<http://www.npscfc.org>

Income Security Programs

Human Resources and Social Development Canada

1-800-277-9914

http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top_nav/program/isp.shtml

Website includes an overview of government pensions and old-age benefits and how to apply for them.

Seniors' Info

<http://www.seniorsinfo.ca>

Lists national and Ontario services and resources targeted to seniors.

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