

Barely Getting By and Facing a Cold Maine Winter

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MILBRIDGE, Me. — They have worked since their teens in backbreaking seasonal jobs, extracting resources from the sea and the forest. Their yards are filled with peeling boats and broken lobster traps.

In sagging wood homes and aged trailers scattered across Washington County, many of Maine's poorest and oldest shiver too much in the winter, eat far more biscuits and beans than meat and cannot afford the weekly bingo game at the V.F.W. hall.

In this long-depressed "down east" region, where the wild blueberry patches have turned a brilliant crimson, thousands of elderly residents live on crushingly meager incomes. This winter promises to be especially chilling, with fuel oil prices rising and fuel assistance expected to decline. But many assume that others are worse off than themselves and are too proud to ask for assistance, according to groups that run meal programs and provide aid for heating and weatherizing.

"One of our biggest problems is convincing people to take help," said Eleanor West, director of services for the Washington Hancock Community Agency, a federally chartered nonprofit group. "I tell them, 'You worked hard all your life and paid taxes and are getting back a little of what you paid in.'"

Over the last half century, Social Security, Medicare and private pensions have lifted most of the nation's elderly. In 1960, one in three lived below the poverty line; now fewer than one in 10 do. But in Washington County, the poverty rate among those 65 and older is nearly one in five and many more live only a little above the federal subsistence standard in 2007 of \$10,200 for a single person and \$13,690 for two.

For thousands on fixed incomes, fuel assistance may decline while Social Security checks are scarcely rising.

Viola Brooks, 81, worked in fish and blueberry factories while her husband worked in textile and logging jobs. Now widowed, she gets \$588 a month from Social Security, supplemented by \$112 in food stamps and one-time fuel aid of more than \$500 for the winter.

But this year, that fuel aid will not fill a single tank. The average house cost \$1,800 to heat last year, and minimal comfort this winter may require closer to \$3,000; trailers will require somewhat less. Electricity and rent already take up most of Ms. Brooks's income.

"I'm broke every month, and the trailer needs storm windows," she said. "I cook a lot of pea soup and baked beans and buy flour to make biscuits."

"Some day I'd like to go to a hairdresser," Ms. Brooks said of a dream deferred. Still she says she enjoys her lovebirds and cats, and points out that "some people have it worse."

Jobs for the elderly, a growing trend nationwide, are virtually nonexistent in these hamlets. Many people survive with help from a range of programs including food stamps, [Medicaid](#), disability and energy assistance; others suffer silently, long used to hardship and fiercely independent.

In a pattern still common, older people here often held a series of seasonal jobs, usually without benefits. They worked on lobster boats and dug clams or bloodworms (to sell for bait) from spring to fall, raked wild blueberries in August, harvested potatoes and then made Christmas wreaths for mail-order companies to mid-December. Wives often worked in sardine canneries or in blueberry processing.

"By their 50s, their bodies start breaking down," said Tim King, director of the community agency at its headquarters in Milbridge, adding that high rates of smoking, obesity and diabetes also contributed to early aging. The aid programs define those as 60 and over as elderly.

Because of their irregular careers and payments into the system, many people get Social Security benefits far below the national average of more than \$1,000 a month.

Velma L. Harmon, a 79-year-old widow, receives only \$220 a month from Social Security and has a grand total of \$85 to live on each month after she pays her subsidized rent and utilities at her apartment complex in Machias, one of a growing number of such federally aided facilities for the elderly.

She is grateful for free lunches provided by the Eastern Agency on Aging, another government-financed group, but too proud to apply for food stamps that would give her a bit more spending money. "Trying to buy Christmas presents, that's the hardest thing," said Ms. Harmon, who has a mangled finger from her years of snipping sardine heads in a canning factory.

The preoccupation right now is soaring fuel prices: cheaper natural gas is unavailable in this region, and wood heat is often impractical or insufficient. But because of limited federal money, average fuel assistance for the 46,000 low-income Maine families expected to apply will probably decline to \$579 this year, from \$688 last year, said Jo-Ann Choate of the Maine State Housing Agency.

"Low-income people aren't even going to be able to fill up a single tank of fuel oil," Ms. Choate said. "They already wrap themselves up in blankets during the winter. This year they'll be colder."

The disabled, and there are many, may have it hardest. Dolly Jordan of Milbridge has a history of two bad marriages, a bone-crushing auto accident and poor health, and looks and feels older than 61. With osteoporosis, arthritis, diabetes and obesity, she spends most of the day in a wheelchair and uses a combination of a gripper, a broom and a cane to make her bed or hang her laundry.

Come winter, she hangs a blanket over the front door of her little red wooden house, where she has lived alone the last 10 years and which sits on concrete blocks with no foundation. She turns the heat off at night to save fuel.

Her disability payment is \$623 a month, plus she gets just \$10 from the state and \$74 in food stamps. After paying the housing tax and her utility bills, she said, she must watch every remaining penny. A daughter drives her to the distant town of Ellsworth for cheaper shopping.

Like many, she keeps a police scanner on as a diversion and, unable to afford cable, she watches the same videos over and over — her favorite is “On Golden Pond.”

“I wish for bedtime to come,” she said. “The days are so long.”

Easing down a ramp to her mailbox is a perilous 15-minute ordeal. Still, she said, “I wait for Fridays.”

“That’s junk-mail day, and I read all the ads. That’s my best day.”

She added, “There’s always older people out there who have it harder.”

Frederick and Kathleen Call, in Harrington, are in their 60s and live in a 1970s trailer with buckling walls. They live on his disability check — he has had six heart attacks — and food stamps and fuel assistance. Like many others in the region, they buy all their clothes at a church-run thrift shop. They spend their days playing board games and rummy and watching squirrels on their porch.

“We used to go to the food pantry for a free box,” Ms. Call said, “but I saw an old woman who looked like she really needed it. She was thin and cold. I gave her a blanket. We haven’t gone for free food for years.”

Some people here seem to have sunny outlooks no matter what. In the fishing village of Jonesport, Elizabeth Emerson, 87, is hard of hearing and has a titanium knee but is spry and irrepressively cheerful.

She lives in the tiny house her husband, a trucker, built in 1949, and has a view of the gravestone where her name is already etched next to his. Having a daughter nearby, and a total of 52 grand-, great-grand and great-great-grandchildren, whose pictures fill the walls and the refrigerator door, helps in ways practical and emotional.

Ms. Emerson said she “thoroughly enjoyed” the 25 years she spent working as an aide in a nursing home, and she demonstrated the yodeling she used to perform on command for one patient.

Each day she walks with her dog, Sabrina, down to the stony beach where her family once swam. “I saw moose tracks the other day,” she exulted. “Here is where I used to pick heather.”

With her Social Security payment of \$683 a month, she refuses to feel impoverished.

“I was never a person to be extravagant,” Ms. Emerson said, adding, “I don’t play beano,” using the local term for bingo.

Besides, she said, she can still afford an indulgence here and there. “My greatest vice,” she added, “is Hershey bars.”