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David C. Wihry
Jennifer A. Crittenden
Lenard W. Kaye
Jaye L. Martin

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A Subgroup Analysis of Legal Needs Among Older Adults in Rural Communities

David C. Wihry, MPA; Jennifer A. Crittenden, MSW; Lenard W. Kaye, DSW/PhD; & Jaye L. Martin, JD
University of Maine Center on Aging and Maine Legal Services for the Elderly

Methodology

- Surveys were distributed to key subpopulations of older adults in Maine via 5 area agencies on aging and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. In some instances proxies were used to provide information on particular subgroups. These proxies represented a snowball sampling of professionals who worked directly with older adults including area agency on aging staff, case managers, and social workers. Subgroups surveyed include the following:
  - Homebound older adults
  - Oldest old (those 70+)
  - Older adults who recently received a benefits denial notice from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services
  - Older adults with low literacy (proxies used for this group)
  - Older adults with limited English proficiency (proxies used for this group)
  - Surveys were distributed in the spring of 2011 to older adults via the mail. A phone survey option was also offered to those who were unable to complete a written survey. One hundred and eighty (180) surveys were returned representing a 31% return rate.
  - The needs assessment survey is a 10-item questionnaire using modified survey items from existing legal needs surveys conducted by AARP in Ohio and Florida in addition to a legal survey developed by Maine’s Pine Tree Legal Assistance. The survey questions about legal needs in addition to some basic demographics such as age, gender, and household income. Analysis of survey language places the readability of the survey at a Flesch-Kincaid level of 6.2 (6th grade reading level).
  - The proxy survey was conducted via electronic surveying consisted of older adult survey items that were modified slightly to match the target audience (professionals who are 3rd party). Forty-one proxy surveys were returned.

Demographic Context

- Maine is now the oldest state in the nation, with a median age of 42.7 years and adults ages 65 and older already comprising approximately 15.9% of the state’s population (compared to 13% nationally).
- Maine is also one of the most rural states, ranking 38th in population density with only about 41 people per square mile. Nearly 60% of all Mainer live in rural areas.
- Maine’s median income is also below the national average. In some rural counties, the median income was over 20% lower than the state as a whole. Therefore, individuals living in the most rural counties of Maine and its have lower incomes and higher rates of poverty compared even to individuals living in less-rural southern Maine.

Results

Top Legal Issues

- Among those 70 years of age and older, a majority (67%) reported having legal problems in the previous year. This group experienced fewer issues with accessing medical services, government benefits, and relationship violence when compared to their peers in other groups. Medical issues: [F(2, 105) = 9.88, p = 0.000], government benefits: [F(2, 105) = 6.10, p = 0.003], and relationship violence: [F(2, 105) = 3.08, p = 0.050].

Key Legal Issues

- Only 45% of those with a benefits denial indicated they had experienced a legal issue in the past year. However, by definition, this group is already experiencing a potential legal issue because of that denial action.
- Homebound older adults were less likely to report having difficulties obtaining medical services compared to those in the benefits denial group [F(2, 105) = 8.86, p = 0.000]. [Tukey HSD; P< 0.001]

Outreach Implications

- All 5 subgroups indicated that their area agency on aging is a first stop for information on legal concerns followed by community-based social service agencies, informal supports (family and friends), and mail. Outreach efforts should be geared toward providing resources to these organizations.
- Given the findings around common legal issues of concern, outreach resources geared toward critical populations should focus on top legal issues that cut across groups: scams, government benefits, home repairs, medical services, and utilities issues.
- Outreach should also be customized to specific subgroups based on issues of importance to each subgroup and preferred outreach methods.
- Social service providers and informal supports are a key resource in helping older adults self-identify legal issues, especially for those who have experienced a benefits denial.

**Top Four Legal Services**

- [**Probate matters**]
- [**Debt collection**]
- [**Getting phone/heat/electric/cable**]
- [**Housing accommodation**]
- [**Getting medical services**]

**Top Five Legal Issues**

- [**Financial scams**]
- [**Probate matters**]
- [**Debt collection**]
- [**Housing accommodation**]
- [**Medical issues**]

**Next Steps**

Findings have been presented to various stakeholders including members of the legal community and area agency on aging directors in Maine. It is anticipated that these findings will be applied to outreach and education efforts with these key populations.

**References**

- Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center (2006).
- US Census Bureau: (i) American FactFinder
  - Downloaded November 21, 2011
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- US Census Bureau: (ii) American FactFinder
  - Downloaded March 2010 from
  - [Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center](http://margaretchasesmithpolicy.org/)

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The full report, Legal Needs Assessment of Older Adults in Maine: 2011 Survey Findings From Key Populations of Older Adults is available online at: [http://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/publications](http://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/publications)