

2012

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Wihry, David C.; Crittenden, Jennifer A.; Kaye, Lenard W.; and Martin, Jaye L., "A Subgroup Analysis of Legal Needs Among Older Adults in Rural Communities" (2012). *Maine Center on Aging Research and Evaluation*. 11.
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A Subgroup Analysis of Legal Needs Among Older Adults in Rural Communities

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University of Maine Center on Aging and Maine Legal Services for the Elderly

Project Description

- A legal needs assessment of older adults in Maine was conducted by surveying key populations of older adults who are often hard to reach through traditional outreach and service provision methods: homebound, oldest old (70 year of age and older), older adults who have recently received a denial of benefits or a reduction in their benefits amount from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and those older adults with limited literacy or limited English proficiency. Proxies were surveyed on behalf of those with limited literacy and limited English proficiency.
- Focal points of inquiry included basic demographics, use of LSE services in the past year, legal issues experienced in the past year, preferred methods for receiving legal information, and the utility of various legal service options.
- Findings underscore the common legal concerns among older adults in these subgroups while also identifying legal concerns that are more pressing for a particular subgroup vis-à-vis their counterparts in other groups.

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 eight (108) 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 includes 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).

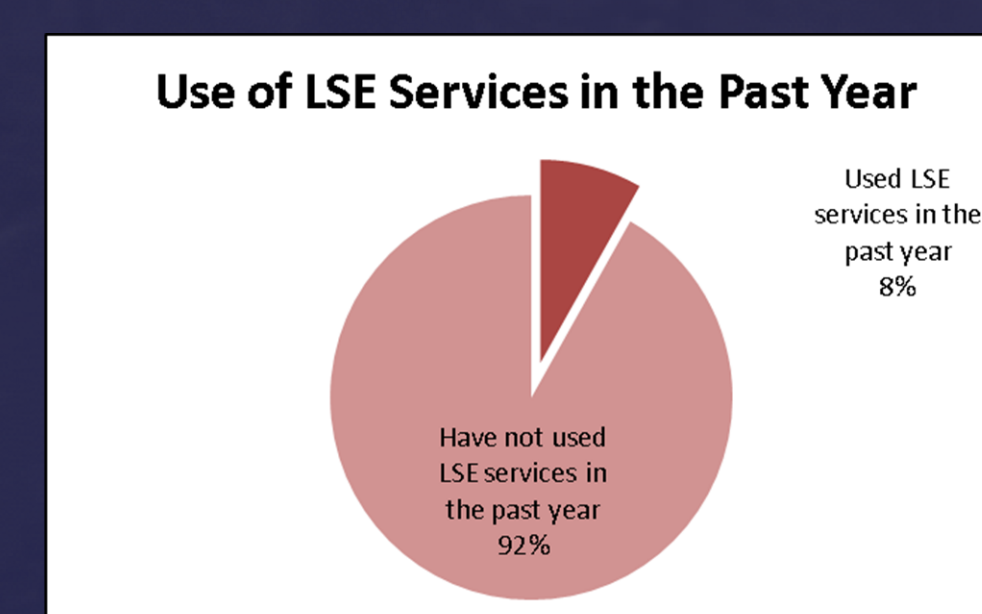
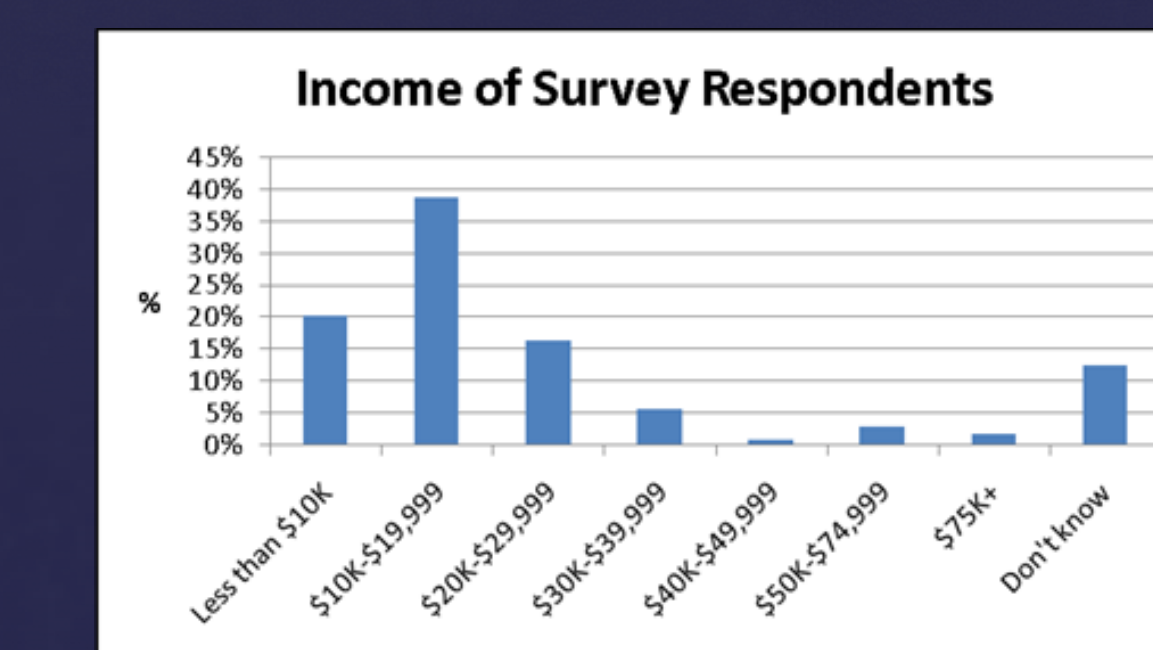
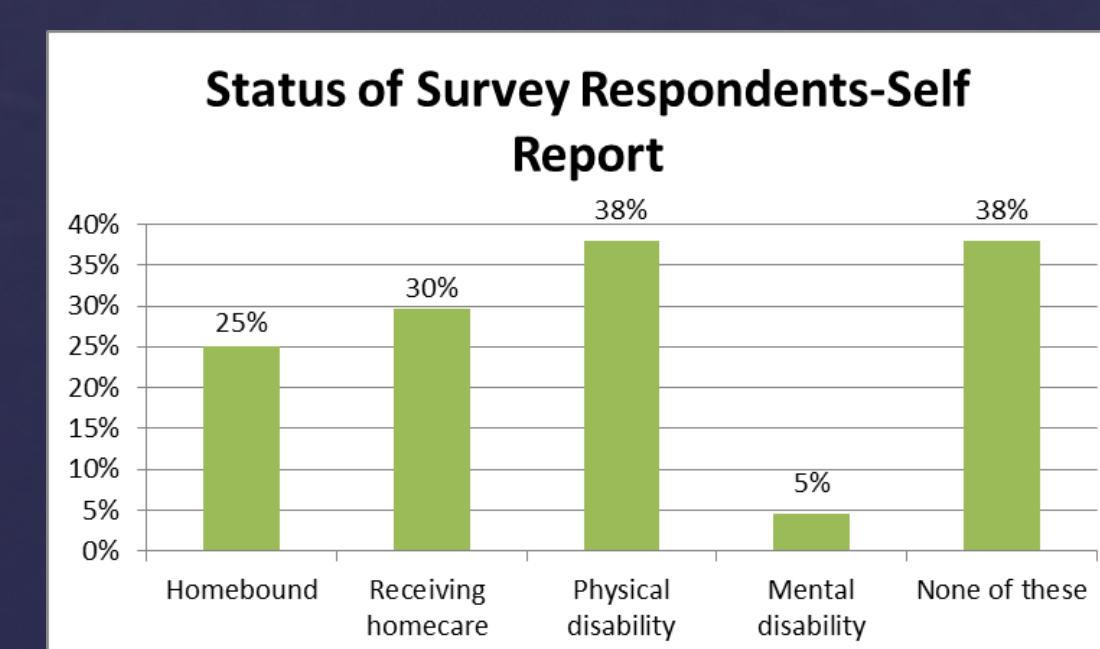
• The proxy survey was conducted via electronic surveying consisted of older adult survey items that were modified slightly to match the target audience (professionals who are 3rd parties). Forty-one proxy surveys were returned.

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)^[i].

• 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 Mainers live in rural areas^[ii].

• Maine's median income is also below the national average. In some rural counties, the median income was even 20% lower than the state as a whole. Therefore, individuals living in the most rural counties of Maine tend to have lower incomes and higher rates of poverty compared even to individuals living in less-rural southern Maine^[iii].



Results

Top Four Legal Services	70+	Benefits denial or reduction	Homebound	Low literacy	Limited English proficiency
Handbook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Low cost or free attorney	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotline	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Website	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legal seminars				✓	✓

Top Three Outreach Methods	70+	Benefits denial or reduction	Homebound	Low literacy	Limited English proficiency
Area Agency on Aging	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Service Agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Friends and Family			✓	✓	✓
Mail	✓	✓	✓		

Key Legal Issues

• Based on the percentage of individuals reporting problems, the most common issues across subgroups include financial scams (38%), home repair problems (19%), obtaining or retaining government benefits (18%), debt collection (18%), and accessing medical services (14%).

• 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) = 9.88, p = 0.000], (Tukey HSD; P=.001).

• 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], (Tukey HSD; P=.000); government benefits: [F(2, 105) = 6.10, p = 0.003], (Tukey HSD; P=.002); and relationship violence: [F(2, 105) = 3.08, p = 0.050], (Tukey HSD; P=.039).

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 mailings. 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, governmental 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 services 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.

References

- [i] US Census Bureau (n.d.) American FactFinder. Downloaded November 2011 from <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- [ii] US Census Bureau (n.d.) American FactFinder. Downloaded March 2010 from <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.
- [iii] Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center (2006). *Poverty in Maine*. University of Maine, Orono.

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.

Top Five Legal Issues	70+	Benefits denial or reduction	Homebound	Low literacy	Limited English proficiency
Scams	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Getting or keeping government benefits		✓	✓	✓	✓
Home repairs	✓	✓		✓	✓
Getting medical services		✓		✓	✓
Getting phone/heat/electric/cable		✓		✓	✓
Housing accommodation			✓	✓	
Debt collection	✓		✓		
Unsafe housing				✓	✓
Abuse or relationship violence				✓	✓
Medicare Part D benefits				✓	✓
Identity theft			✓		✓
Consumer purchase	✓				
Probate matters	✓				

Note: Some legal issues tied for top 5 status among subpopulations.



Project research carried out by:
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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>

Funding for this project provided by:
Maine Legal Services for the Elderly and the U.S. Administration on Aging

