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## Living the not-so-golden years

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THE ELDERLY face high costs -- from health care to housing -- and many won't have enough money to pay the bills. Rather than leaving people in the financial shadows, the country needs a revolution to keep aging lively and affordable.

The years after age 65 can be "a third of our lives," notes a recent report from the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Boston Foundation that is ringing alarms about elders' high living costs. To measure these costs, the institute developed the Elder Economic Security Standard, which looks at the price of aging at home, where most people want to stay.

The standard reveals that many elders can't cover their expenses. In Boston, the median household income of people age 65 and older is \$17,470. But the institute calculates that to meet basic living costs -- including fair-market rent, transportation, and health care -- an elderly couple needs \$30,557. Home-owning elders who have paid off mortgages are somewhat better off; they only need \$21,802. By contrast, the average annual Social Security benefit for couples is \$19,776, creating a gap for elders without additional savings.

Other financial strains loom, such as losing a spouse, developing a serious illness, and the doleful drumbeat of increasing property taxes. Social Security checks alone can't keep up with such expenses.

What can close the gap? A multi front effort that includes government action, improving people's financial literacy, new technology, and workplaces that cater to older workers.

The state Legislature took a key step last year when it enacted a law that allows low-income elders to use MassHealth insurance (Medicaid) to cover long-term care whether in a nursing home or "in the least restrictive setting," which could be at home. Now state officials have to implement that law.

Another job for government is to streamline and simplify access and eligibility for health insurance and other programs. Too often the label "choice" is used to describe what is really a dense maze of options.

Policy makers must also pay attention to geography, meeting the varying social service and transportation needs of elders in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. So while some programs might centralize services in apartment buildings, others would include mobile and visiting services.

The country can also capitalize on technology. Homes could become "smart," equipped with sensors that can monitor vital statistics and send electronic signals for help. The challenge is to make such technology affordable and easy to use for a generation that did not grow up with computers.

To spark action, the Gerontology Institute is holding briefings around the state. But the need is already clear: Only sweeping change can protect the extra years that everybody hopes they live to enjoy. ■