

HOST LEDE: Thin social security checks, little retirement savings and a lack of affordable housing are forcing some California seniors onto the streets.

In some counties, seniors are the fastest growing part of the homeless population.

As part of our series “Graying California” KPBS’s Amita Sharma spent the day with a 71-year-old man who lives on San Diego’s sidewalks.

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Carl Russell wakes up at 5am.

He’s slept on the sidewalk, sitting up against San Diego’s senior wellness center.

CARL: The concrete is hard and you can’t get comfortable when it’s raining and your clothes are all wet and you have dogs walking up and down beside you and strange people.

Dressed in jeans, a blue windbreaker over an orange sweatshirt, he says he’s still tired.

CARL: I can’t sleep solid because I don’t want to get my throat cut. I lost a friend here who got stabbed to death.

Carl points to his wooden cane. His only defense, he calls it.

AMBI cane sound

His first big challenge of the day is finding a spot....

CARL: ...to do the number two.

So, he walks eight blocks through other homeless encampments to a nearby deli.

AMBI: Good morning.

CARL: This is a nice guy. He feeds me. He gives me a cup of coffee and sometimes he lets me play the lottery for a dollar.

Carl seems to know everybody here.

He spends some time saying hello.

And then walks back to the senior center for a shower and food.

After that, he gets on a bus.

CARL: Here comes my 215.

REPORTER: What do you do on the bus?

CARL: I sleep.

Carl has been homeless for more than three years now.

He stole a rotisserie chicken from Vons a while back because he was hungry.

CARL: I can't see no gold at the end of the rainbow because it's getting harder and harder and I'm getting older and older.

He says friends, other homeless seniors, have killed themselves.

CARL: Charlie committed suicide. It hurt me so bad I had tears. The first time he tried to commit suicide, I talked him out of it. I called 911.

Carl keeps looking for a place to live.

But affordable housing options in California for relatively healthy homeless seniors are few.

And regular housing is way beyond reach. He gets \$800 a month from Social Security.

The new apartments being built around him in San Diego cost triple or quadruple that amount.

CARL: I can't get a job and work anymore with two knees and two hips replaced. It's almost impossible and who is gonna give you a job?

He's working with a pro bono lawyer to try to convince the Teamsters Union he's entitled to a pension from his truck driving days.

In the meantime, he prays and hopes.

But on this day, dejection got the better of him.

CARL: Society doesn't care about seniors. We've worked most of our lives and this is our reward to be homeless and on the street?

In San Diego, I'm Amita Sharma.