

**HOST LEDE:** More and more Californians are working past the age of 65. Today, 20 percent of California seniors are in the labor force, many because they can't afford to retire.

But the seniors who most need a job often have the hardest time finding one. As part of our "Graying California" series, KPCC's David Wagner has this profile.

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Seventy-one-year-old Emma Allen has the kind of warm smile you need to be a good receptionist.

**EMMA:** I'm the first one that they see when they come in the door. And whatever they need help with, I know where to direct them to.

Here at this senior center in South Los Angeles, she greets people at the front desk.

She answers the phone.

*AMBI phone rings*

**EMMA:** Good morning, People Coordinated Services, this is Emma, how may I direct your call?

The caller wants to know what's on for lunch.

**EMMA:** On the menu today, they have orange juice, turkey tarragon stew, biscuits, vegetables...

*AMBI dips under*

But it's pretty clear lunch isn't why he called.

He just wanted to say hi to Emma.

**EMMA:** I've been fine, how about yourself... Well then you're doing good then... [laughs] ... Yes you are...

Emma is filling this role as part a job training program for low-income seniors through the city of LA.

She's been here more than four years, and says the people are now like family.

**EMMA: You come in. Sometimes you're not feeling well. But then the first person through the door will have a big smile on their face, and, 'Good morning, Emma,' and that whole gloom just goes away.**

This program is supposed to help seniors find jobs.

But it's not supposed to become a permanent job.

Emma has to leave the program in May.

**EMMA: It's very rewarding. I'm going to miss it.**

She needs a new job, she says, because Social Security isn't enough to live on.

Like many seniors, she has no savings.

They were eaten up by medical bills toward the end of her husband's life.

**EMMA: That's it. I don't have a choice. I need the income.**

Working is nothing new for Emma.

She's been a probation officer. A special education teachers aide.

She's worked at a meat packing plant.

Now, she's open to pretty much anything.

**EMMA: I can say I'm a people person. Anything to do with people.**

To stay in this training program, Emma has had to constantly be looking for a job.

She's documented her search in this thick manila folder.

*AMBI folder plops down*

Every place she's applied to has its own entry.

**EMMA: I went to J.C. Penney, I went to Big Lots, I went to...**

*Dips under*

Her kids help out with online applications.

But so far, no luck.

**EMMA: I went to Jack In The Box, Target...**

*Dips under*

No one has ever outright told her she's too old.

But Emma thinks that's part of why she's not getting hired.

**EMMA: I could feel it, you could tell. Half the time they don't even look at the application. I fill one out. They just look at me. You know, they see that I'm older. And I guess they figure I can't keep up or whatever.**

**DAVID: Looking at all these places that you've applied, looking at all this paperwork, how does it make you feel?**

**EMMA: Tired [laughs]. Tired, because, out of all this, somewhere there should've been something. I'm running out of places. I don't know where else to go.**

If she doesn't find a job, she'll have to move in with one of her kids.

But, she doesn't want to be a burden.

And she wants to keep working.

**EMMA: It's a part of making me feel that I'm worth something. I'm contributing something. I'm not just sitting on my hands waiting for somebody to give me something. Maybe down the line somebody might see that.**

In Los Angeles, I'm David Wagner.