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Wisconsin Women's Network announces Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative

Receives grant support from the Helen Bader Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies and Wider Opportunities for Women

Wisconsin Women's Network is leading a statewide initiative to ensure that Wisconsin's seniors are able to age in place with dignity and economic security. A recently-awarded \$30,000 grant from the Milwaukee-based Helen Bader Foundation will allow first-year implementation of this exciting project in Wisconsin. A \$3.4 million grant from the Atlantic Philanthropies to Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) will eventually expand the project to 20 states and produce a national database with information on all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The *Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative* (WiEESI) will provide a conceptual framework and concrete tools to shape public policies and programs to promote the economic well being of older adults, whether or not they have the capacity to be fully self-reliant or need certain public supports. A key component of the initiative is the *Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Standard*, a measure of well-being that determines the income and supports needed for older adults to live modestly given their unique health and life circumstances.

Through a combination of coalition building, research, education, advocacy and media outreach at the community, state and national levels, the WiEESI will illustrate the basic costs that older adults in Wisconsin face and how their financial security is affected when life circumstances change. WiEESI will educate seniors about actual and projected living costs to inform their financial, employment, and life decisions. WiEESI will also help local and state agencies set goals, assess needs, and design programs to help older adults age in place.

The EESI was launched by WOW in July 2005 with an award by the Retirement Research Foundation. WOW and its national research partner, the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, joined with local and state organizations in five pilot states – of which Wisconsin is one – to shape policies and programs to promote the economic well-being of senior citizens. The pilot state coalitions are led by: the National Economic Development and Law Center (CA); the Health and Medicine Research Group in partnership with the Shawnee Alliance for Seniors (IL); the Massachusetts Association of Older Americans, Inc. (MA); Pathways PA (PA); and Wisconsin Women's Network (WI).

According to 2005 U.S. Census data, 3.6 million older Americans live in poverty. Ten percent of individuals aged 65 or older live in poverty and women are almost twice as likely to live in poverty in their senior years as men. Poverty hits older women of color the hardest – 25 percent of African-American and 22 percent of Hispanic women live in poverty. For women living alone, the rates are even higher. (continues)

“These figures are just the tip of the iceberg, given that the outdated federal poverty threshold fails to accurately document the hardship in our nation by ignoring today’s true cost of living,” said Joan Kuriansky, Executive Director of Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW). “The National Elder Economic Security Standard measures the income seniors actually need to meet such basic expenses as housing and health care costs. Unlike the federal poverty threshold, the Elder Standard is calibrated to household size, geographic area and life circumstances, and broken down on a county-by-county basis. The expansion of the Elder Economic Security Initiative will have a significant impact on reshaping the public discourse about aging and public benefits in general, as well as on specific policy debates and aging programs.”

Early findings from Massachusetts, the first state to release an Elder Standard, demonstrate that elders cannot live at the poverty level or even on the average Social Security income without subsidies for housing and health care. The Massachusetts Elder Standard illustrates that costs for even the healthiest senior citizen can be as high as \$23,600 a year, while the average social security benefit is \$12,024. This information, coupled with the advocacy of the state coalition, is having a significant impact. The newly elected governor has agreed to convene a statewide commission on long-term care, and innovative outreach efforts are helping seniors overcome their resistance to enrolling in public support programs.

In the years ahead, the Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative will provide important research to inform policy makers, providers, advocacy organizations, and activists in Wisconsin and across the U.S. as they develop programs and policies to ensure the economic independence of America’s senior citizens.

For more information about the Wisconsin Elder Economic Security Initiative, or to join as a Coalition Partner contact: Wisconsin Women’s Network, 608-255-9809, wiwomen@execpc.com

Wisconsin Women’s Network is a non-profit, non-partisan coalition of women’s organizations, labor unions, religious and education groups, providers of human services, and business associations with a mission to advance the status of women and girls through communication, education, and advocacy. For more information visit www.wiwomensnetwork.org

The Helen Bader Foundation, Inc. supports innovative projects and programs that advance the well-being of people and promote successful relationships with their families and communities. The Foundation is named for the late Helen Bader, a Milwaukee businesswoman who became a social worker. With offices in Milwaukee and Jerusalem, the Foundation awards an average of \$12 million per year in grants, totaling more than \$163 million in grants since it was established in 1992. For more information visit www.hbf.org

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) leads two national networks promoting economic security within the United States: the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (FESS) focusing on the needs of low-income working families and the Elder Economic Security Initiative, addressing what income seniors require to age in place. WOW works in 35 states, the District of Columbia, and at the federal level to promote programs and policies that accurately measure the income and assistance needs of families and the elderly. For more information, please visit www.wowonline.org

The Atlantic Philanthropies are dedicated to bringing about lasting changes in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Atlantic focuses on four critical social problems: Ageing, Disadvantaged Children & Youth, Population Health, and Reconciliation & Human Rights. To learn more, please visit www.atlanticphilanthropies.org