



Help Managing Your Bills

Q: Can my Mom get help untangling her bills?

A: Yes, your Mom can get help---and it's free. As many as 100,000 elders in Massachusetts need help in managing their basic household finances. The reason could range from visual problems to dementia. In some cases, a widow or widower has never handled the bills before, and is now overwhelmed by a spouse's death. Whatever the cause, the inability to keep the household running financially can lead to serious debt, eviction, even homelessness.

But there is a program that provides a free "Money Manager" for seniors who are having trouble handling their rent, food or utility bills. These Money Managers can help balance checkbooks, see that creditors are paid off, and even negotiate payback schedules for arrearages. It's called the "Massachusetts Money Management Program," and it's been around since 1991.

Sponsored by AARP, Mass Home Care, and the state Executive Office of Elder Affairs, Money Management has helped more than 5,500 elders keep their finances on an even keel. More than 1,000 volunteers visit their clients each month, sorting through the bills, balancing the checkbook, ensuring that money is not missing.

One of the additional benefits of this program is that the presence of a Money Management Volunteer discourages anyone from trying to steal or scam the elderly clients in the program. Having an independent person overseeing the funds reduces the likelihood that unauthorized people will gain access to an elder's money. With so much identity theft occurring, a Money Manager can help detect and resolve such problems. Unfortunately, financial exploitation of elders is one of the most rapidly growing forms of elder abuse in the state.

The Money Management program does not provide services to wealthy individuals, and is not an investment counseling service. The program is targeted to people age 60 and over, with limited means, who cannot manage their means. To get into the program, an individual must have an annual income of \$20,778 or less, \$29,402 for a couple-and liquid assets not greater than \$30,000.

In most cases, the volunteer does not make financial decisions for the elder, but only makes suggestions, leaving the final decision on how money will be spent to the elder. These volunteers travel to an elder's home, providing this free help right in their client's living room. Many of the volunteers are AARP members, some with financial services backgrounds, such as accountants or bank employees. To find out more about Money Management, call 1-800-Age-Info, and press "3".