

A 50% increase in medical bankruptcies--a worry for adults assisting aging parents

A new study released in the American Journal of Medicine [http://pnhp.org/new\\_bankruptcy\\_study/Bankruptcy-2009.pdf](http://pnhp.org/new_bankruptcy_study/Bankruptcy-2009.pdf), reported that bankruptcies due to medical debt rose 50% from 2001 to 2007. Elder Law of Michigan experienced a similar rise in the calls for help from older adults who are desperate for relief from high debt accumulated from family illnesses. It is a critical short term problem, but for people approaching or in retirement, the situation is devastating. The combination of lost jobs, premature forced retirement, diminished returns on investments for retirement and the personal and economic pain of bankruptcy wipes out security in retirement and forces many from the middle class into a grueling struggle to maintain their homes and stay independent.

As adult children start to assist parents or other family members as they need help later in life, the magnitude of the debt can be shocking and stressful. The trauma older adults face as they consider bankruptcy can jeopardize their physical and mental health, complicating an already difficult situation. Worries about supporting the elder after bankruptcy can also be a big concern.

A partial solution is to call the Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors' Benefit Enrollment Center at 800-347-5297. For people over 60 with declining income, the Hotline may be able to find income supports and other programs to help older adults maintain at least a basic level of economic security to cover primary needs like healthcare, prescription drugs, utilities and groceries. The service is free and assistance in applying for programs is available. For many families, the screening opens up a new world of help and economic security. A website is also available for families that want to screen themselves. Visit [www.elderlawofmi.org/legalhotline](http://www.elderlawofmi.org/legalhotline). See the middle of the page for the Benefit Enrollment Center screening tool.