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# Social Security turns 70

## Beneficiaries celebrate safety net system

### 22 percent of West Virginians rely on program

**BY NATALIE NEYSA ALUND** *The Dominion Post*

If Wadestown resident Martha Johnson didn't get her Social Security check each month, the 84-year-old woman would have to get a job.

"And I don't know if I'd be able to," she said. "Besides, who's going to hire an 84-yearold?"

Since 1980, she's gotten a Social Security check for \$1,069 in the mail each month. It's her only source of income.

Johnson started getting the money after her husband, who worked in the maintenance department at Ruby Memorial Hospital, died in 1980 of a heart attack and she was left to financially support their three children.

Johnson and other Social Security beneficiaries from Monongalia, Preston and Tucker counties met at the Westside Senior Center in Westover on Sunday to celebrate Social Security's birthday and what it means to them.

The day marked the 70th anniversary of the date the Social Security Act was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt — Aug. 14, 1935.

The program has pulled millions of seniors out of poverty and ensured that seniors for the past 70 years have been able to retire with dignity, said Rita McCrobie, president of the Monongalia-Preston Labor Council.

"For 70 years, Social Security has been an effective and successful system for the people of West Virginia," McCrobie said. "Hundreds of thousands of West Virginians who are retired and disabled depend on Social Security as their only source of income to survive."

"I sure couldn't live without it," said Johnson, as she glanced at a birthday cake being cut in honor of the day.

McCrobie said Americans have an obligation to stand up and celebrate the success of the Social Security program and to protect it for the next 70 years and beyond.

The celebration, sponsored by the Monongalia-Preston Labor Council and the West Virginians United to Protect Social Security, drew keynote speakers including Delegate Charlene Marshall, D-Monongalia, and former delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer.

"I'm happy to be here today and hope we have Social Security for all time," Fleischauer said. "We need to fight to keep Social Security something everybody can enjoy."

Marshall said she collected Social Security after her father died in an Osage mine, leaving behind her mother and six children. She collected it again after the death of her stepfather, who also died in a mine.

"Without Social Security, my family would have had a rough time," she said. "It's important for us to acknowledge this date because it's so important to so many of us in large numbers in West Virginia."

Sarah Etherton, with the Institute for Labor Studies and Research, said Social Security has provided 70 years of "rock-solid guaranteed benefits and financial security" to millions of seniors, surviving spouses and the disabled.

Etherton said one in five seniors rely on Social Security as their sole source of income.

In West Virginia, she said, 409,392 — more than 22 percent of the state's population — receive Social Security. Of those, 207,000 are retired workers, more than 79,000 are women from rural communities, 76,076 are disabled workers and 38,989 are children.

Morgantown resident Vicky Shears is one of those former child recipients.

The 45-year-old received Social Security when her father retired in 1979.

"Social Security is a benefit for children of retirees because when they retire and have a child under the age of 18 or that is still in college, the child can receive Social Security," she said.

Shears got \$74 a month which she used to cover her rent payments in college.

"Without it, I would have had to work while in college and would have had loans to pay back for school," she said. "So Social Security is a good incentive for kids to go to college."

Not only does Social Security aid widowers and the children of retirees, it's a safety net for newly retired couples.

Rita Raber, 62, of Blacksville resident drew her first check for \$600 in July.

"It's added income for us, since my husband retired and is disabled," Raber said.

The couple, who both had major surgery last year, are using that extra income to pay off medical bills for Rita Raber's back surgery and her husband Bernard Raber's brain surgery.

"I don't know what we would have done without it," she said.



**Ross Mantle/The Dominion Post** Social Security beneficiaries Martha Johnson (left), a collector for 25 years, Ruth Raber, a collector for two months, and Vicky Shears, who collected benefits in college after her father's retirement, gather during the 70th birthday celebration of Social Security at the Westside Senior Center in Westover on Sunday afternoon.



Barbara Evans Fleischauer (left photo, right) speaks to attendees at the 70th birthday celebration of Social Security at the Westside Senior Center in Westover on Sunday afternoon. **Ross Mantle/ The Dominion Post**