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Woman allegedly misuses funds worth 50K

By *MORGAN DAY*
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LANCASTER -A 37-year-old woman is accused of misusing government benefits to the tune of \$50,000.

Sandra Muck, 37, of Millersport, was in the Fairfield County Jail on a \$20,000 bond. She is charged with grand theft and receiving stolen property.

Muck was booked Wednesday at 9:36 p.m., according to a sheriff's report.

She applied for public assistance through Fairfield County Job & Family Services in Lancaster, but was not eligible to do so, said Fairfield County Sheriff Dave Phalen.

"She indicated she was living with her mother when in reality she was really living with her husband," Phalen said. "She received over \$50,000 in benefits she should not have received."

She misused medical assistance, gas cards and possibly food stamps, he said.

Muck has not yet been arraigned.

Many seniors cutting expenses at expense of health

By MICHELLE GEORGE • The Eagle-Gazette Staff • July 27, 2008

FAIRFIELD COUNTY - Jenny Singer knows what it's like to be on a tight budget. The 67-year-old's 18 prescriptions altogether total more than \$300 a month - not to mention the bills she's had to pay for three separate hospital visits in the past six months.

And the money she receives from social security and her deceased husband's pension leaves her with about \$100 a month for both food and gas.

"All I see is bill, bills, bills," Singer said. "All I want is to just be able to live. But you can't live on \$25 a week for food and gas."

Singer makes up a growing number of people in her age group who are struggling to make ends meet each month, according to a survey released in May by the Ohio AARP.

The survey - conducted among AARP members - suggests that residents 50 years or older are struggling to make ends meet and some might even be taking such drastic measures as not refilling prescriptions or paying bills, said Kathy Keller, communications director for AARP Ohio.

The survey suggested 59 percent of seniors 65 and older surveyed found it more difficult to pay for essential items such as food, gas and medicine. She said 47 percent found it more difficult to pay for utilities like heating, cooling or phone service.

Singer said she hasn't gotten to the point yet of cutting back on medication - but she has cut back on travel and the amount of groceries she buys.

And five days a week, every week, she takes advantage of the free meal provided for residents 60 and older through the Fairfield County Meals on Wheels.

"I couldn't afford to eat three meals a day otherwise," Singer said.

Mary-jane Gard, volunteer and community outreach coordinator for Meals on Wheels-Older Adult Alternatives of Fairfield County, said she's noticed an increase of around 50 people a day coming in for the weekly lunches the organization provides.

She said Meals on Wheels - funded through Title-III of the Older Americans Act through the Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging and grants and donations - is serving about 700 meals per day.

"Some of the people are only eating the meal we provide for them," Gard said. "It then makes me wonder, what do you do on the weekends?"

Jim Gibson, 65, of Lancaster, eats lunch at Meals on Wheels four times a week.

He said the one area he has struggled in the most is paying for groceries.

"I have only a few bills; my cable, my rent and my cell phone," Gibson said. "I spend about \$200 to \$300 a month on medications."

Fairfield County Meals on Wheels isn't the only organization seeing an increase in older residents seeking help.

Barb Abram, supervisor for Fairfield County Job and Family Services Adult Unit, said her caseload from June 2007 to June 2008 went up an additional 500 cases in people applying for food stamps and Medicaid.

Abram said the majority of the customers 65 and older are receiving about \$10 in food stamps a month.

"A lot of our customers are living on social security only and it's a struggle," Abram said.

Bethany Dohnal, spokeswoman for COAAA, agreed. She said senior citizens are in a "desperate situation" right now. But they're not the only ones.

"We've seen an increase in calls from caregivers who are taking on the financial burden," Dohnal said. "It starts out slow with caregivers taking (the person they are caring for) to the grocery store and will eventually escalate to them helping with the purchase."

Gard said she encourages senior citizens who are struggling to not be afraid to ask for financial help.

"We are seeing a lot of malnourished adults and people who say, yeah, I need to take three heart medications a day, but I'm only taking one," Gard said. "There's no shame in asking for assistance. We all need assistance from time to time." Singer fears what the future might be for her if prices in food and gas continue to rise.

"I already have to watch every little thing I do," Singer said. "I may have to sell my house next."

Keller said senior citizens should not be discouraged in what may seem like a hopeless situation.

"I think there is a certain amount of pride some people have (about asking for help), but those people need to say to themselves, 'I need to do this,'" Keller said.