

Lee Jin-han and Lim Sun-ja just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. But instead of rejoicing in their long-lasting relationship, the couple is swamped with worries about their future.

They own a small house on the outskirts of Seoul and have 200 million won in a savings account, but their assets are far from lucrative due to a recent dip in the real-estate market and record-low bank interest rates. With all of their six children struggling to make ends meet, the elderly couple has only Lee's pension to fall back on.

Lee and Lim's situation is similar to that of hundreds of thousands of other senior citizens, according to private estimates. The lack of a government welfare system and modest private pensions make the seniors vulnerable to economic change, especially inflation. They also are bearing the brunt of societal restructuring, which has accelerated since the early 1990s. Traditionally, seniors escaped the expenses of maintaining a home by selling their empty nest and moving in with one of their children, but that is changing rapidly.

Housing crunch

Looking ahead, government officials see a housing crunch for seniors. Nursing homes and so-called "silver towns" do not meet current needs and demand will only increase as the nation's postwar generation retires. About 7 percent of Korea's population is composed of citizens over the age of 65, with Korea aging at a rate that is highest among OECD countries. By 2019, those older than 65 years of age will make up 14 percent of the population, jumping to 20 percent in 2026. "The current facilities cover only about 20 percent of the total demand, mainly because we're still in the infant stages in developing the so-called silver industry," says Ko Jeong-min, researcher at Samsung Economic Research Institute.

And even those are usually too expensive for the average citizen; most are reserved for the affluent who can afford such comforts for the rest of their lives. "Our clients are mostly those belonging to higher-income brackets, but we do recognize a growing need for a government-level plan to envelop more senior citizens as the population ages at such a fast pace," says Ahn Yong-sung, assistant manager of Noble County, Samsung Group's classy silver town nestled in Suwon. "I'm only one of the few among my friends who can actually afford to live here. Most usually end up living with their kids," says one 62-year-old resident who declined to be named.

Excessive red tape may be another factor impeding the growth of silver facilities, as the current land-

use laws see no reason to regard them as an exception.

Lengthy process

"Officials have become much easier to talk to, but the process of receiving construction permission is still pretty lengthy," says Ahn of Noble County. The government, on the other hand, disapproved of arbitrary exceptions.

On the upside, a vibrant new market is in the making. Given the business potential of the market, policymakers and the business circles are being urged to embrace the aging society. Up until now, medical equipment manufacturers stole the limelight in the silver industry, but a new trend has been emerging as the elderly have become more technology-savvy and fashionable.

The Silver Apparel Technology Center that opened in Seongnam City earlier this year mirrored changes among seniors. "Contrary to what the younger generation may think, elderly people are becoming increasingly fashion-conscious," says center head Kim Gun-hwan. Lee Hae-soon, who runs "Bodre," a small boutique for the elderly in NewCore Department Store says in she has seen slow but steady changes in the patterns of the clothes her store carries. "You'd think that people would stop caring about how they look after they get past 60, but from the trend I've been witnessing, that can't be farther from the truth," she said, herself in mid-fifties but refusing to give an exact number.

Right now, senior citizens don't even have a standardized size code for reference. The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy announced in May that it would channel nearly 6 billion won into the center over the next four years to prop up small and mid-sized firms manufacturing clothes for the elderly.

Government support

Other government ammunition to prepare for an older society embraces a possible revision of the senior welfare laws in the latter half of this year. "Although it's too early to reveal the details of the revision, we're keeping on top of things with the goal of pursuing a revision in early fall," said Shin Seung-il of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Once realized, the revision would bear the fruit of President Roh Moo-hyun's earlier election pledges to nurture the nation's senior welfare infrastructure.

Shin stresses, however, that the elderly need to prepare on their own. "Many times, people end up suffering in their later years because they have left all their fortune to their children. While the government

has a role to play in laying the infrastructure, the public must also learn to become more self-efficient," he said.

To fulfill its role, the Commerce Ministry plans to pump some 150 billion won (\$128.2 million) into high-tech silver industries over the next five years. Recently, it rounded up companies manufacturing medical equipment and other digital paraphernalia involving the elderly to hear out their troubles. "The government seems more interested now in these 'silver' issues," said Yoon Il-yong, head of Daeyang Medical Co.

Other perks for the elderly include a possible cut in ticket prices for a ride on the KTX, Korea's first bullet train. If related laws are passed in July, senior citizens can buy prices at 30 percent cheaper.

Making ends meet

To make ends meet and to reduce any financial burden on their children, more and more retirees are

returning to the work. Last week, a 30,000-strong crowd thronged to the two-day Silver Job Fair, and the applicants meant business. "The people aren't just here to mingle or for fun. They are very serious and they are all armed with resumes," says Choi Seung-hwan, a spokesman for the event, which was hosted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. And unlike the past when the jobs offered seldom varied from baby-sitting or janitorial duties, they now run the gamut of professional translators to models or television extras.

Attesting to the success of the job fair was the higher percentage of elderly workers aged 60 or older. According to figures from the National Statistical Office, the number inched up to 10.3 percent, up from 9.97 percent in May of 2003. A decade ago, the same figure stood at 7.78 percent.

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Parent Support Bill Prepared

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The opposition Grand National Party (GNP) said on Friday that it will push for a special bill aimed at giving benefits for children who support their parents and grandparents.

Under the legislation titled, "Special Law on Parents Support," the children who live with their old parents and support them will be entitled to 2 million in tax exemptions on expenses spent for supporting their parents. At present, the limit is only 1 million won.

GNP first promised the parent-support bill as part of its campaign pledges ahead of the April 15 general elections. Details of its legislation were disclosed ahead of the Parents' Day that falls tomorrow.

The GNP legislation also intends to introduce a paid vacation of up to seven days for a trip to accompany the old parents, while allowing a paid vacation of up to 30 days for giving care when they fall ill.

Also included in the bill is the provision of allowances of between 100,000 won and 300,000 won for each of people who are over 65.

The bill also calls for the formation of a special committee at a local government level to select children who set an example in parental support, with an award of 10 million won.

At the same time, the opposition party seeks to raise a mandatory level of employment of those who are over 55 by 2 percentage points to 5 percent.

The bill also envisions the establishment of a government agency which will be responsible for policies related to the elderly, while calling for a beefed-up medical insurance for them.

GNP officials said that the party is planning to introduce the bill as soon as the incoming National Assembly opens in June.