

PUBLISHED BY COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS

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SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2019

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## FULFILLING

The Mission of Empowering Seniors to Live at Home

*Carlos Martinez*



# United HomeCare:

## FOCUSED ON FULFILLING THE NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY

It should come as no surprise that one of Miami-Dade County's largest and most respected not-for-profit agencies, United HomeCare, is leading the charge in how this city cares for its aging population.

Now celebrating 45 years, this "gentle giant" in the community, with more than 800 employees and volunteers providing 22,000 hours of care every week to 3,500 clients, has a significant presence here.

Their mission of allowing seniors to age with dignity and respect in the comfort of their own home, however, goes well beyond benefiting seniors, the disabled, and their family caregivers.

Turns out, this big-name organization also has a big voice.

United HomeCare is turning up the volume by advocating for sustainable improvements in programs and services that will not only help meet the current demands

of this important sub population of our community, but also help South Florida – and the entire state – be a more welcoming place for new retirees.

Inspire Health recently caught up with Carlos Martinez, president and CEO of United HomeCare. He had much insight to share on this front, such as the fact that most of the half million people over age 60 in the Miami-Dade region are living on low and fixed incomes.

Martinez says older adults generally prefer to live in the comfort of their own home as they age, and United HomeCare's programs are succeeding helping individuals to prevent or delay institutional care. He adds that on average home care saves older adults thousands of dollars annually. There's also significant cost savings to Florida taxpayers as well. The cost of placing these same

adults in nursing homes typically costs tax payers millions of more dollars annually.

It's concerning to Martinez, that sustaining home-care services presents an uphill battle, as rising business costs outpace reimbursements paid by funding sources.

Fixing this problem entails not only identifying new and innovative funding sources, but also will require a paradigm shift in seeing seniors as worthy of the investment.

In other words, there are no quick fixes – and a lot of work to do.

With the continuation of what he terms, the "senior tsunami," fed by 10,000 retiring baby-boomers each day flooding the U.S. market, Martinez says his agency is finding it necessary to go beyond the comfort of "home" – to take their case into the halls of government, corporate board rooms, and even into local classrooms.

# TALKING WITH CARLOS MARTINEZ NEVER GETS OLD – SO LET’S SEE WHAT HE’S GOT TO SAY, FIRST HAND:

**IH: If a persistent devaluation of seniors in our society is an obstacle in making positive change, then perhaps instead of a paradigm shift what we need is a good a paradigm shove?**

Well, that’s an interesting way to put it. But clearly, we do need to be more aggressive in order to realistically manage the growing issues of aging in our communities, and to properly fund the programs and services seniors so sorely need and deserve.

So yes, people need to stop this persistent “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” mentality when it comes to the aging. And, I believe we can do that if we re-frame our approach to addressing their needs as an “economic development” imperative.

**IH: So, explain this notion that seniors present an economic development opportunity.**

Look at it this way: Gone are the days when everyone in the Northeast would head straight to Florida to retire. We are no longer the only “sunshine state” in the country. Many other sun-belt states are now competing with us for the baby-boomers – and the dollars that come with them.

So clearly, if we are going to attract these active retirees, we have to do a few things better than other states. Such as provide better access to healthcare and offer more affordable housing options.

Right now, in South Florida, the elderly are using up to 50 percent of their income for housing. This means they are being forced daily to make decisions between paying rent, paying for medication, or buying food. It’s an endless and unsustainable cycle.

And honestly, it’s unconscionable that something like this is happening today in America. We need to do better for our senior population. So, in Florida, several communities are having conversations to develop a dedicated funding source for senior services. The need for increased funding persists

in communities such as Miami-Dade; Broward; Palm Beach; Tampa; Orlando; Jacksonville; and in the Florida Panhandle as well.

**IH: What exactly would the dedicated funding source provide for?**

Topping the list is funding for transportation for seniors, better access to healthcare, affordable housing, and also enhanced access to cultural amenities. I mean, just because someone is aging, doesn’t mean they stop liking art or music. Problem is, how will they trek all the way to downtown Miami, pay for an expensive ticket, and enjoy a show?

And how do we make that affordable and available? With technology. We can pipe in Broadway shows, operas, and symphonies – right into the community rooms of assisted-living facilities, nursing homes, and senior communities.

But we could also get corporate donors to provide the technology and sponsor the programming. We are strategizing in all directions.

**Q: So, part of your advocacy plan is to outreach to local businesses, too?**

Absolutely. We’re being much more vocal with many of the different chambers of commerce around town. We are educating them to open their eyes to this important subset of the greater Miami population, especially when they plan for their goals conferences.

**IH: So this is a major goal of United HomeCare going into its 45th year?**

Yes, it’s a goal of ours. But I’d even go so far as saying it’s a personal crusade for me. And sometimes when you’re so strongly driven by mission, you start considering all kinds of out-

side-the-box ideas.

For instance, how about modeling a non-traditional funding stream for senior services to be funded through a “Hemp Tax?” This way, we do not increase property or sales taxes but rather place a tax to be borne by the nascent Hemp industry, which could eventually become a significant funding stream.

**IH: What other innovative ideas are in development?**

We are working to engage our youth to get involved in older-adult issues. Because realistically, it is difficult – if not impossible – to take a bus load of seniors out for an eight-hour drive to Tallahassee, to advocate for themselves at the state capital. So why not enlist young adults to do it for them – and do so very effectively.

These young people could say they are representing their grandparents and their parents – and rather convincingly suggest that legislators listen to them because, as young voters, they are going to be around and politically active for another 60 years!

We also need to engage heavily with the business community. Aging and older-adult issues are not just a government concern. They’re a community concern. We need to have the private sector working with the public sector.

We are all responsible to save for retirement and to take care of our parents. But it’s a multi-pronged approach. As a society, we cannot continue to be of the mind-set where we wait until we’re seniors and then look solely to the government and community-based agencies to magically take care of it all for us. It’s a new day. ■

## ABOUT UNITED HOMECARE

**In 1974, a United Way pilot program, United HomeCare, aimed to help families care for their elderly and disabled relatives in the comfort of their own home. Since then, United HomeCare has stayed true to that mission as an independent organization – and now a United Way impact partner – by serving more than 3,500 older adults and disabled adults annually.**