

Make Florida's aging safety net of programs for the elderly stronger | Opinion

BY CARLOS L. MARTINEZ

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Home care and community-based care for elderly residents allow them to age in place and save taxpayers' money. GETTY IMAGES

For decades, national surveys have shown that older adults prefer to age in place, in familiar surroundings. These surveys underscore the fact that, "There's just no place like home." This is not just a tagline for United HomeCare, it's an integral part of our corporate DNA and mission.

As Florida's population ages, we must strengthen safety net programs for home- and community-based care. These programs include the state-funded Community Care for the Elderly (CCE) and Home Care for the Elderly (HCE). Both are essential for helping older adults who do not qualify for Medicaid to continue living independently at home for as long as possible, preventing institutional care.

As president and CEO of United HomeCare®, I see the challenges older adults face every day as they struggle to make ends meet on a limited budget and have to make daily decisions whether to buy food vs. pay rent or pay rent vs. purchase medications. Who are these older adults you may ask? - They are former teachers, first responders, day care workers, office workers and even professionals that saved for retirement, but through no fault of their own, have out-lived their savings. Many don't qualify for Medicaid yet desperately need home care services.

Florida has the highest concentration of older adults, with 26 percent of its population of 20 million age older than 60 compared to the nationwide average of 21 percent. Miami-DadeCounty has a high concentration of older adults, about 21 percent of the county's population of 2.7 million.

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This picture becomes complex when you take into account that nationally and locally we are facing a workforce shortage of home health aides needed to care for a growing population of older adults. Investment in the training of home health aides and supporting family caregivers in the skills they need to help loved ones are imperative. Caregivers for older adults must have proper training, security and background screening and vetting. You can't allow just anyone to take care of frail adults.

Indeed, more sustained funding is needed to help this segment of the elderly population. Public funds for home and community-based programs go a long way in preventing costly institutional care.

According to the Florida Council on Aging, Inc., home- and community-based programs save taxpayers a substantial amount of money when you consider that the average cost of home care is approximately \$8,000 when provided by Florida's aging network of providers versus \$65,000 for nursing homes annually.

Since United HomeCare's founding in 1974 as a division of United Way of Miami, our organization has helped approximately 250,000 individuals to age with dignity at home. Our services provide assistance with many activities of daily living including bathing, grooming, cleaning, grocery shopping, errands, medication supervision, and coordination of doctor visits and transportation. To alleviate the isolation that homebound seniors often face we also provide companion service with the support of community volunteers.

Florida's traditional network of providers, comprising mostly grassroots not-for-profit organizations like United HomeCare, play a vital role in meeting the elderly's needs and should be strengthened as safety-net providers. Addressing needs and risks in the home and collaborating with healthcare providers is essential for keeping seniors well at home. This model, proven to work, has over time demonstrated the value of addressing issues that go well beyond the doctor or clinician's capacity such as identifying and addressing risk factors and social determinants of good health, including providing nutritional food through home-delivered meals, making sure elders are safe and have stable housing, and coordinating their access to transportation.

Empowering home- and community-care providers to play a greater role in delivering social services, counseling and guidance will help improve the quality of life for older adults in our community and are proven to save millions in taxpayer dollars.



Carlos L. Martinez is president & CEO of United HomeCare, Inc., based in Miami

Martinez