

The Miami Herald

MiamiHerald.com 

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MONDAY, JULY 13, 2015

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Frail, vulnerable seniors need workable solutions

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With the White House Conference on Aging taking place this month, the imperative to address the needs of our growing senior population has never been clearer. This issue is particularly dramatic for those of us serving the elderly and frail in South Florida.

Three of the top 10 cities in the country with the highest percentage of people age 65 and over are in South Florida. From 2010 to 2040, Florida's older population is expected to almost double.

It is urgent that the White House meeting come up with new ways to provide services for the growing elderly population. We will have to do more with less money to fund these needs. Tax deductions and other economic incentives will be essential.

One of the issues on the agenda is long-term care. As president and CEO of a network of rehabilitation, skilled nursing and long-term residential-care facilities, I know that it will never be possible to care for all of our seniors in these types of facilities. Clients who enter our doors with Medicare and private funding often find themselves moving to Medicaid support after exhausting all other resources.

Today, elderly and disabled Medicaid recipients account for an estimated one-third of the total caseload but more than half of total spending. We must look for new efficiencies to evolve the way we care for frail seniors.

In the same way that members of Congress worked together, regardless of party, on Medicare after it was passed in 1965, they must now work to find new improvements to Medicare and Medicaid. Tangible changes, such as the ability for Medicare to negotiate on pharmaceutical costs — as do the Veterans Administration and Medicaid — are imperative. This alone would positively affect the financial situation of many lower-income seniors. And, with the recent Supreme Court ruling in favor of

the Affordable Care Act, we must ensure it works for all those it is intended to support, including the growing senior population.

Perhaps most important is the creation of support systems allowing seniors to stay in their homes. About one-fourth of Florida residents age 65 and over live alone. To support those who will not be able to move into long-term-care facilities, as well as their caregivers, we need different and enhanced options.

For example, the availability of transportation assistance to take patients to medical appointments is key. We may need to provide a new type of patient advocate to accompany people to their appointments. Few caregivers can afford to regularly leave work and/or family obligations to participate in the myriad of necessary doctor visits that elderly patients often require.

Also, easier access to a greater number of respite care options, including home-based and skilled nursing facility support, would allow caregivers a break from care without concern for their loved ones. While many caregivers are grateful to be able to play the role that they do, it is important that they have the means to take a break from the inherently constant nature of their responsibilities.

Overall, it would be reasonable to consider tax deductions for family members or other unpaid caregivers who have responsibility for the elderly or disabled. As a country, we must recognize that they are performing an important role with real economic value, which is currently overlooked and under-supported.

Better use of modern technology also offers solutions. Technology tools can give family members the means to keep track of an elder's prescriptions and general health while doctors can talk to — and see — patients to remotely assess conditions. Teenage grandchildren can provide technical assistance.

The White House Conference on Aging is an important forum. It highlights the critical issues around care for our seniors. There is a great deal of hard work ahead to ensure that we are prepared to meet the needs of our aging population. But it is work worth doing to care for those who have cared for us.

Elaine Bloom is the president and CEO of Plaza Health Network. She previously served in the Florida House of Representatives and was Speaker pro tempore from 1992-1994.