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How we age matters

According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, for the first time in history, children will be outnumbered by adults 65 and older by 2034. That should frighten all of us.

Senior (those 55 and older) support services are not at the top of any governmental list. So where will that leave our aging population and our children who will have to care for them?

That is one of the many topics we will cover during the fifth annual South Florida Institute on Aging "How We Age Matters" set virtually from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, June 23.

We will address ideas and solutions to lifestyle, employment, healthcare, financial and diversity challenges faced by older adults, encouraging conversation and collaborative problem solving to better help older adults thrive as they age. The aging population and communities are essential to the economic and social stability of the country and some of the underserved seniors will need economic security.

Today more than ever, we need to ensure that our aging population is thriving. It is incumbent upon all of us to improve economic and social outcomes and provide community services to empower people as they age with programs and services that assist at-risk children, elderly and frail adults, veterans and their families and retirees reentering the workforce as well as decreasing the digital divide in our communities.

For our aging population to thrive, it will take all of us, collaborating on many levels. While SoFIA does focus on the aging population, our programs and services go beyond just older adults. We want everyone to thrive as they age and make sure they have the resources to do so.

Several industries and professionals, in addition to retail establishments like grocery and drug stores, that work with the aging community play a role in how we age:

■ **Technology:** Perhaps nothing has had a significant impact on the rapidly growing aging population from both a consumer and a commercial perspective than technology. On an individual level, tech is supporting older adults and their caregivers by improving quality of life, independence and safety. For those who participate in our SoFIA Tech training, 90% felt more confident in accessing Social Security and medical benefits; 77% felt more connected to friends,



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family and the community; and 71% reported an increase in their confidence to remain independent.

■ **Health and medical products and services:** We are living longer and living healthier than we have in the past. However, healthcare is critical to the aging population. During our symposium, we will highlight how telehealth will be able to reach seniors safely and effectively in the future and how it can help combat racial and age discrimination in medical care.

■ **Caregivers:** Particularly during the pandemic, many of us faced behavioral health (mental health) challenges. For our aging population, that meant isolation from family and friends and additional stress for caregivers. We must look at how behavioral (mental) health affects our caregivers and those our caregivers care for, along with providing local and national resources.

■ **Insurance:** Medicare is available to U.S. citizens 65 and older, and Medicaid is available to those for free or at low cost based on income and family size. Even before we are eligible, we need to understand our coverage and the associated expenses. Many need a supplement policy. And the time to consider a long-term care policy is when we are in our 40s and 50s, not when we are in our 70s and 80s.

■ **Financial planning:** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2030, all baby boomers (those born 1946 to 1964) will be 65 years and older. This generation will have more financial capital; live longer than generations before them; have an increased caregiving and health needs and be more technology savvy. Underserved seniors will be working longer and retiring later. We must equip and support them to make sure they aren't left behind. In the last four years, SoFIA has brought thousands of people together to continue on the path of our mission to empower our aging population and their families to thrive.

SoFIA is a nonprofit think and act tank. We create and deliver socio-economic support programs for South Florida seniors that can also serve as a model for other communities with aging populations. We provide innovative services tailored to meet seniors' caregiving and respite, civic engagement and economic security needs. We hope you can join us to learn more during our Symposium for a robust discussion on "How We Age Matters." For sponsorship information, tickets and donations, visit thesofia.org.

Nikki Austin-Shipp is the CEO of the Wilton Manors-based South Florida Institute on Aging.