

Helping seniors lead safe, independent, connected lives

As adults age into their senior years, many contend with growing challenges to independent living. This issue takes center stage in areas like Florida, which has the highest concentration of older residents in the United States.

Most seniors want to maintain independence, but health and safety concerns can derail those plans. Even those who are able to live alone safely can face loneliness.

"A lot of times, the elderly are overlooked," said Aurelio Fernandez III, president and CEO of Memorial Healthcare System. "We saw a need and established a program that helps those most in need."

The Memorial ALLIES [Adults Living Life Independently, Educated & Safe] Program addresses social isolation and related issues that threaten the independence of older adults. The no-cost services include increased and improved coordinated care, monthly health screenings, nutritious daily meals, social connections, transportation assistance and education to prevent fraud and abuse.

ALLIES started as a 2017 pilot program supported by a \$65,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Broward. Over the past three years, the program has grown to six full-time home visiting counselors and case managers, thanks to additional funding through the Community Foundation of Broward and funding from the Frederick A. DeLuca Foundation [Subway restaurant chain] and the Florida Blue Foundation [Blue Cross Blue Shield], for a total of \$331,000 annually.

"The program stemmed from under-

standing what seniors need and can benefit from, and implementing a program that would fit their needs," said Tim Curtin, Memorial Healthcare's executive director of community services.

Community partners play a big role in the program's ability to meet seniors' needs, said Nina Beauchesne, Memorial Healthcare executive vice president. "We partnered with the city of Hollywood. We needed a place to help our senior population with exercise, education and socialization. They allowed us to use a city facility that was not being utilized. It helps us operate something that's cost-effective and gives seniors high-quality, community-based services."

Other community involvement has included high school student volunteers who teach seniors new technology skills.

Many of the services are provided in the seniors' homes. For example, team members visiting seniors do an environmental safety scan. "We check to see if it's a safe dwelling," Curtin said. "Are there loose throw rugs? How is the lighting? Are there smoke alarms and fire extinguishers? We ask them if they have trouble getting in and out of the bathtub and shower. We'll offer to have a grab bar installed if they don't have one."

When COVID-19 hit, ALLIES staffers quickly pivoted to ensure they could continue to monitor, assist and interact with seniors in unique ways. They met such challenges as distribution of food and other supplies, safety checks, making reservations for vaccinations and engaging with individuals who have limit-



GATHERING WITH FRIENDS: During the COVID-19 pandemic, seniors expressed the desire to visit with friends so team members organized 10-at-a-time senior gatherings at local parks.

ed access to information technology. The South Florida Digital Alliance helped seniors stay connected by donating repurposed laptops.

But technology could not stave off all the loneliness. Curtin said, "Around the holidays in December, I got a call from a client who said, 'Tim, we've got to get back together in person. I'd rather die of COVID-19 than die of loneliness. All this remote work and people dropping off food is great, but I want to be back

with my friends.'"

In response to that plea, Curtin and his team members started holding 10-at-a-time senior gatherings at a park gazebo. "The first time we got them back together, they were so happy to see each other again that some of them cried," he said.

The program is replicable, Fernandez said, "but it has to be part of your mission and your vision of what your role is in the community." ●