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CONTACT:
communications@elderaffairs.org
850-414-2142

Florida Department of Elder Affairs Concludes Year with Hallmark Innovations, Ingenuity, and New Programs

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Under the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis, Lt. Governor Jeanette Nuñez, and Secretary Richard Prudom, the Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA) has released multiple new and innovative programs and policies aimed at helping older adults stay independent, reducing social isolation, and bringing new attention to behavioral health for the aging population.

“The work we’ve accomplished this year has helped improve the quality of life for one of our most vulnerable populations,” **said Governor Ron DeSantis**. “We’ve been able to ensure older individuals remaining at home continue to receive nutritious meals, we’ve focused on reducing social isolation through new mental health initiatives, and we’ve increased the number of dementia-caring and livable communities that make life better for all Floridians. I assisted in the delivery of the 100,000th meal through the **Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative** in June. That same program has now provided over 3 million home-delivered meals to older adults and persons with disabilities; it’s just one example of the numerous innovative programs we’ve unveiled to meet the needs of Florida’s adult population.”

“Florida’s Aging Network has shown incredible resourcefulness during the most challenging times,” **said DOEA Secretary Richard Prudom**. “The 11 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) created new business models to increase all home-delivered meal services, including the launch of the new restaurant meal initiative, when congregate meal sites closed. They worked tirelessly to bring new solutions to new demands. In fact, home-delivered meals increased by over 200 percent compared to the same time last year. And **DOEA delivered over 13 million meals** during a seven-month period. Ingenuity among local providers allowed the new partnership with the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association to be self-sustaining, and the program is scalable as it moves into the future.”

Beginning in March, DOEA and its affiliated agencies turned all immediate attention to ensuring basic needs for older adults were met. This included activities such as meeting needs for steep increases in home delivered meals, safely recruiting and mobilizing volunteers, and staffing grocery and prescription delivery services. In response to COVID-19, the Florida Department of Elder Affairs received funding from the **Families First Act** and **CARES Act** to provide these additional services to older adults and caregivers throughout the state. The Department

4040 Esplanade Way, Tallahassee, FL 32399-7000

Phone: (850) 414-2000 | Fax: (850) 414-2004 | TDD: (850) 414-2001

visit us at: elderaffairs.org

contracted with the Area Agencies on Aging, who received nearly **\$18 million from the Families First Act** and nearly **\$54 million from the CARES Act**. The majority of funds have been used to provide meals to older adults throughout the state. As the AAAs, their lead agencies, and providers stabilized these processes, the focus shifted to address social and emotional needs, brainstorming creative ways to address and help mitigate the negative health impacts of loneliness and reduce social isolation in ways consistent with social distancing guidelines.

Mental Health Initiatives and Social Isolation Reduction

DOEA worked with the Aging Network and the Aging and Disability Resource Centers to step up telephone reassurance calls and averaged more than **50,000 calls a month** over a three-month period through both responsive and proactive calls to check on the unmet needs, well-being, and safety of older residents. Additionally, DOEA created mental health messaging through the **Talk It Out Campaign** and placed flyers in the bags of home-delivered meals. Social networking reiterated the fact that depression is not a normal part of growing older and listed numerous resources at **#TalkItOutFL**. Most recently, over **32 Talk It Out billboards** have gone up throughout the state.

First Lady Casey DeSantis provided a video testimonial as DOEA launched the **Florida SAFE Survey** in August. Over 12,000 individuals have visited www.FloridaSAFESurvey.com. By taking the survey, designed by BellAge, respondents discover how their behaviors affect their own health and the health of those around them. The survey is free and may be taken multiple times so a person can see how different actions may impact their risk factors and SAFE behavior scores. The survey itself is adaptable to changing situations, **includes a mental health section**, and the most recent additions to the survey include questions on how an individual will spend the holidays.

Another solution to breaking social isolation is found on the DOEA website homepage through the therapeutic robotic companion pets initiative. **DOEA partnered with Ageless Innovation's Joy for All® Companion Pets** to enhance meaningful interactions among older adults, their caregivers, and family members. DOEA began delivering therapeutic robotic pets to socially isolated seniors and adults living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias in April of 2020. The interactive companion pets help combat loneliness or depression by improving overall mood and quality of life. Robotic pets remain available through DOEA's online application and are available for any older adult. DOEA has distributed over **4,000 robotic pets within a six-month period**.

For December, DOEA worked with the AAAs to create a holiday mental health campaign with the theme **Together Apart: Holidays at Heart**. This program refocuses the Talk It Out mental health campaign and specifically addresses loneliness seniors may experience during the holidays. The state's 11 Area Agencies on Aging will draw attention to the many behavioral health resources in their geographic areas and reach out to people through additional telephone reassurance calls. References, resources, and a press kit for the campaign are available at www.holidaysatheart.org.

Long-Term Care Expanded Programs and Transitions

In addition to populations served in home and community-based programs, DOEA recognized social isolation for residents of nursing facilities and assisted living facilities needed to be

addressed. With facility visitors restricted to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, there was widespread concern that residents would become more at risk for depression and mental decline. DOEA worked to engage residents in thoughtful ways to keep individuals connected and hopeful.

Project: VITAL (Virtual Inclusive Technology for All) is a partnership with the Alzheimer’s Association. The project supports the well-being of seniors, their families, and caregivers by allowing them to remain virtually engaged and connected through specially created tablets designed to access resources like music, books, games, and the ability to video chat and email with family outside. It also facilitates educational and support opportunities for staff through a video-based learning platform and offers opportunities for virtual and online education and support for families and caregivers at home. During the initial pilot phase in April, 150 care communities were identified and supplied two tablets per community, as well as virtual training on how to use the equipment and platform.

To date, there are 600 tablets in 300 facilities and more than 20,000 interactions have taken place.

The tablets are preloaded with software programming from **It’s Never Too Late (iN2L)**, enabling residents to connect with their loved ones via video chat with a simple tap on the home screen. The tablet further fosters connection with family by creating individual profiles for every resident, with the added ability for family to add personal photos and videos to those profiles for residents to view whenever they like. Also included on the tablet is an expansive, easily personalized library of applications to support **cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual wellness** for the ultimate person-centered engagement experience. Future expansion is possible through additional partners such as philanthropic foundations, age-friendly communities, and communications companies to increase connectivity.

As Project: VITAL connected seniors through virtual communications, Secretary Prudom worked on the **Governor’s Task Force on the Safe and Limited Re-Opening of Long-Term Care Facilities** in August to assist in making recommendations for easing visitation restrictions and safely reconnecting residents with family and loved ones. Florida’s mission to protect the most vulnerable in nursing homes and assisted living facilities was balanced against the possible negative side effects of long-term isolation and loneliness. The Task Force worked on how to safely allow residents to interact with their loved ones. They held five public meetings in August and developed new guidelines that allowed limited visitations for Essential Caregivers and Compassionate Caregivers. The Task Force ultimately resulted in increased visitations as long as appropriate policies and procedures were in place at each facility to protect residents from unnecessary exposure to COVID-19.

2020 Legislative Session

The 2020 Legislative Session showed a commitment to **Florida’s 5.5 million older adults** with Governor DeSantis and the Florida Legislature supporting sound public policy, research, and initiatives to benefit older Floridians. As the State Unit on Aging, the Department of Elder Affairs championed legislation directly affecting the Department of Elder Affairs and clients served throughout the state. From addressing Alzheimer’s disease and focusing on affordable housing to guardianship and prescription drugs – Governor DeSantis, Lt. Governor Nunez, and the Florida Legislature acknowledged the impact older adults have throughout their communities.

Governor Ron DeSantis signed SB 994 into Florida law, strengthening safeguards for Florida’s most vulnerable citizens under the care and supervision of professional guardians. Throughout the legislative session, **Senate Majority Leader Kathleen Passidomo and State**

Representative Colleen Burton worked in collaboration with DOEA Secretary Richard Prudom and active stakeholders in the guardian program, including attorneys, Clerk of Courts, professional and public guardians, and advocates for wards under guardianship, to help restore public trust, improve transparency, and prevent the exploitation of those under the care of a guardian.

This piece of legislation is a critical step to ensuring Florida's most vulnerable are taken care of, safe from harm, and watched over as it increases protections for individuals under guardianships by eliminating conflicts of interest, ensuring the vulnerable adults' finances are protected, and prohibiting the guardian from signing "do not resuscitate" orders, or DNR, for a ward without permission from the court.

In the State Budget, Governor DeSantis and the legislature showed **investment in the Department of Elder Affairs** by ensuring the protection of those under the care of a guardian, serving seniors and caregivers in need of long-term care services, and providing continued support for Florida's Aging Network. With increased funding for vital programs and services to our state's elders, the Department of Elder Affairs can serve more older adults across Florida's 67 counties. Highlights of the budget include:

- \$2.8 million is provided for **Alzheimer's respite care services** on the waitlist,
- \$4.2 million to serve elders on the waitlist in the **Community Care for the Elderly Program**,
- \$600,000 to serve elders on the **Home Care for the Elderly Program** waitlist,
- \$1.7 million to implement the statewide **Client Information and Registration Tracking System** (eCIRTS) project,
- \$7.7 million provided to serve additionally incapacitated and indigent persons from the **public guardian program** waitlists and to account for the increased cost to serve each ward

Florida has strong leadership with Governor Ron DeSantis, Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Nunez, and the Florida Legislature who recognize the impact of the rising numbers of **Floridians living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD)** and the need to implement bold strategies to find innovative solutions to continue to support those with ADRD and their caregivers. The Florida Legislature also recognizes the increasing number of Floridians living with ADRD and has taken appropriate action to address the ongoing need to implement strategies that support these individuals and their caregivers.

Another legislative accomplishment includes establishing the position of a **Dementia Director within DOEA**. The position will assist the Alzheimer's Disease Advisory Council (ADAC) with the development of the annual report and development of the Alzheimer's Disease State Plan. The director will support the Alzheimer's Disease Initiative, Memory Disorder Clinics, the Florida Brain Bank, and facilitate public education on Alzheimer's disease by coordinating dementia research programs and collecting data on the impact of Alzheimer's disease on the state.

Elder Rights, a Livable Florida, and the Dementia Care and Cure Initiative

Everything points to the fact that the communities that fare best in the 21st century will be those that both tackle the challenges like ADRD and embrace the positive possibilities that an aging population creates – essentially becoming livable communities. The amenities of a **Livable**

Community help to maximize the independence and quality of life of older adults, while also enhancing the economic, civic, and social vitality of the community. Accordingly, there has been an increased emphasis on making existing systems and structures more “age-friendly.”

In April 2019, Florida became the 4th state in the nation to receive the Age-Friendly state designation from **AARP’s Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities**. In embracing the Age-Friendly designation last year, Governor DeSantis shared that he envisioned a Florida where older adults, and indeed all Floridians, will thrive in these supportive and engaging communities, where they not only live but live well and age well. DOEA calls it “Livable Florida.”

Becoming an Age Friendly or Livable Community essentially addresses the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.

They include factors like socioeconomic status; education; appropriate and affordable housing; transportation options; safe streets; safe neighborhoods; protection against natural disasters and protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; employment; and social support networks; combatting loneliness and depression as well as access to personalized health care.

Within this Livable Florida framework, Governor DeSantis has taken important steps.

Florida has 37 Age-Friendly communities and they often go hand-in-hand with the Dementia Care and Cure Initiative (DCCI) and the creation of dementia-caring communities. **Collier County recently joined DCCI as the 15th DCCI Task Force and Dementia-Caring Community in Florida.** Participating communities organize a task force to include professionals, advocates, and community members to bring education, awareness, and sensitivity to the needs of people living with ADRD. All 11 Area Agencies on Aging are now actively involved with a DCCI Task Force.

Communities that address both the challenges and possibilities of aging, including ADRD, will best maximize the independence and quality of life for older Floridians. That’s why Governor DeSantis has directed the Department of Health to add **ADRD** as an additional **Priority Area (PA9)** within the **State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP)**. Updated goals for PA9 include strengthening the capacity to address ADRD through early detection, diagnosis, and brain health; assure a competent workforce through education and training in assisted living facilities, skilled nursing facilities, adult day care programs, hospice facilities, and home health agencies; and enhance support for those living with ADRD and their caregivers.

DOEA’s **Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders (SHINE)** provided over 1,000 Virtual Medicaid Outreach Events for both individuals and the media **reaching more than 28,000 people**. Since the beginning of May 2020, SHINE provided 785 Virtual Medicare Group Outreach Events reaching 19,865 individuals, and 380 Virtual Medicare Media Outreach Events, reaching an estimated 8,770 individuals. In addition, the SHINE Facebook page hosted 575 events, with 6,000 people reached. The virtual Medicare classes resulted in dozens of **Senior Medicare Patrol cases** where beneficiaries have reported being a victim of suspected Medicare fraud, waste, and abuse. SHINE then followed up with each senior to obtain the necessary details to report the cases to the proper authorities.

DOEA and Livable Florida also partnered with Scent Evidence K9 to distribute an initial **2,000 Scent Preservation Kits®** to caregivers of those living with ADRD. The kits were distributed through 17 Memory Disorder Clinics throughout the state. Older adults with ADRD may have an increased tendency to wander and become lost. If that happens, proactive family safety measures, such as the Scent Preservation Kit®, are providing effective response systems to locate missing persons and return them to safety. **DOEA has ordered an additional 3,000 kits**

because of the popularity of requests from caregivers. These kits provide K9 responders with uncontaminated scent articles that significantly reduce the time it takes to locate someone

Other Notable Mentions

DOEA made needed technology transitions to allow continued growth during a pandemic. The **Adult Care Food Program approved 16 new centers** to participate in the program since April. Contract managers made pre site visits online instead of in person and effectively obtained required information from potential providers. Technical assistance has been provided via Skype, Zoom, or telephone for new providers. DOEA is currently reviewing 4 new applications and talking with potential providers.

DOEA's Statewide Medicaid Managed Care – Long-Term Care Program (SMMC-LTC), with primary operations through the Aging and Disability Resource Centers/AAAs, shifted workforces to a fully remote environment. The number of screenings and re-screenings increased by 2 percent.

DOEA's **Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE)** added a new provider, PACE Place, serving Duval County and parts of Clay County. Additional PACE provider applications are under review in Hillsborough, Manatee, and Sarasota counties.

Throughout 2020, DOEA has remained committed to proactive information sharing because it can help older adults cope with social isolation and any accompanying sense of grief or stress. The innovations and new programs provided by DOEA have provided outreach and links to helpful resources that can reduce feelings of loneliness and replace them with a sense of inclusion. Through new and extended partnerships, ingenuity, targeted funding, and expanded technology, **DOEA has remained on mission and on target to promote the well-being, safety, and independence of Florida's seniors, their families, and caregivers.**

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About the Florida Department of Elder Affairs

The Florida Department of Elder Affairs, the State Unit on Aging, helps Florida's elders to remain healthy, safe, and independent. The Department provides most direct services through its Division of Statewide Community-Based Services, which works through the state's 11 Area Agencies on Aging and local service providers to deliver essential services to a vital segment of the population. For more information, please visit www.elderaffairs.org.