Herald-Tribune

Roger Brown ..... Opinions Editor

Centers keep Sarasota seniors connected and independent

Your Turn
Tracie Cardwell
Guest columnist

In the past year, older Americans have faced an alarming squeeze on critical programs designed to help them live with independence, dignity and security. With federal budget changes, funding rollbacks and structural reorganizations, growing gaps threaten the well-being of millions of seniors.

Against this backdrop, community-based organizations like Senior Friendship Centers stand as essential lifelines offering connection, care and support where government services do not.

Earlier this year, Congress extended funding for many Older Americans Act programs only through September 2025, freezing them at prior levels.

At the same time, proposed federal budgets seek to eliminate or downsize cornerstone initiatives such as the Senior Community Service Employment Program, the Lifespan Respite Care program and the State Health Insurance Assistance Program.

Meanwhile, sweeping reconciliation legislation passed this summer introduces over $1 trillion in reductions to Medicaid and SNAP, likely cutting health coverage and nutrition benefits for millions.

More than 61 million people are now over age 65, and that number is projected to nearly double by 2060. Yet per-capita funding for senior services has not kept pace.

Senior Friendship Centers fills the gaps left by tightening federal programs with services that keep people healthier, connected, and independent — which translates to tax and health care savings.

These savings include:

- Preventing costly hospitalizations: Through balance and strength classes, wellness checks and chronic disease management programs, Senior Friendship Centers significantly reduces these risks. Every avoided hospitalization means savings for families, hospitals and Medicare.
- Reducing nursing home placement: The average nursing home in Florida costs more than $108,000 per year. In 2024, Senior Friendship Centers delivered 260,710 hours of in-home services to more than 1,000 case-managed seniors and provided 36,689 hours of respite care to caregivers.
- Meeting basic needs at scale: In 2024, Senior Friendship Centers served 304,150 meals to hungry seniors. Additionally, 76,213 visits to Senior Friendship Centers in 2024 provided safe spaces for exercise, learning and social connection — directly combating isolation, which has health costs comparable to chronic disease.
- Strengthening the local and national economy: Healthy, independent seniors remain active consumers. They shop locally, dine out, volunteer and support Sarasota's civic and cultural life. For every dollar invested in senior nutrition and wellness programs, communities save due to avoided health care costs and generate revenue via local economic activity. By that measure, the 304,150 meals served by Senior Friendship Centers in 2024 likely saved our community in hospitalization costs while adding to the regional economy.
- Volunteer power as economic value: In 2024, 479 dedicated volunteers donated 256,692 hours of service. Using nationally recognized estimates, that work is valued at more than $1.2 million.
- A local anchor in challenging times: The story is clear — when government safety nets contract, Senior Friendship Centers expand their reach.

Older adults stand at the crossroads of rising needs and shrinking system capacity.

Senior Friendship Centers is not simply a charitable program; it is a cornerstone of Sarasota's social and economic infrastructure. The question isn't whether we can afford to support organizations like Senior Friendship Centers. It's whether we can afford not to do so.

Tracie Cardwell is the director of marketing and communications for Senior Friendship Centers in Sarasota.