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Study: Fla. ranks in middle on quality of life for seniors

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Life in the Sunshine State is not always sunny for seniors.

New findings about the quality of life for older adults in Florida validate downturns in recent years, much of it tied to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early deaths climbed. Poverty is up. Housing expenses are cutting into fixed incomes. More seniors suffer multiple chronic conditions.

Florida is in the middle, ranking 25th, for overall senior health among the states, according to the latest America's Health Ranking Seniors Report.

The analysis is sponsored by United Health Foundation affiliated with UnitedHealthCare.

It's not all doom and gloom: More money is spent in Florida for community support programs which help keep seniors engaged.

And Florida's overall ranking among all states went up from 28th last year. That helps keep the state as a top destination for seniors in their golden years.

The report examined social isolation at the county level in all states and determined Collier and Lee counties are among 21 counties with the lowest score, at 36 or below, for isolation based on a range of 1 to 100. The higher the score means the greatest risk of isolation.

A handful of counties, including Dade County, had scores of 57 or above. The other counties are in the northern part of the state.

The risk factors for social isolation include poverty; living alone; being divorced, separated or widowed; never being married; having a disability; and difficulty living independently.

Jaclynn Faffer, President and Chief Executive Officer of Baker Senior Center Naples, said it is a positive indication that the state of Florida increased overall by three points.

“The fact that community organizations step up to the plate and create safety net programs for seniors is indicative of the understanding that government is not funding senior needs to the extent necessary,” Faffer said.

“From the perspective of Baker Senior Center Naples, I was pleased to see they are measuring the risk of social isolation, which is far greater and more serious than we ever imagined. I hope to see our ranking move up in that area.”

How to interpret the findings

The pandemic affected everyone in unprecedented ways, and not everyone was impacted equally, Dr. Joel Caschette, chief medical officer of Medicare and retirement plans of Florida for UnitedHealthcare, said in a statement.

“Social connections and support systems were heavily impacted, especially those of America’s older adults,” he said. “The social relationships that are fostered by an active community decreased, and challenges for seniors’ health rose.”

Impact from the devastation of Hurricane Ian last Sept. 28 in Florida and how it turned lives upside down does not appear to be considered; much of the report is looking at trends from 2019 through 2021.

The analysis examines 52 measurements in social, economic and health data points to come up with the rankings.

The broad categories are community and family safety, economic resources, social support and engagement, physical environment, air and water quality, clinical care, behaviors such as nutrition and physical activity.

The data also looks at lifestyle choices such as sleep, tobacco use and health outcomes.

Nationwide, the report found the early death rate among older Americans 64 to 74 rose 22% since 2019 that is largely tied to opioid-related deaths.

Drug deaths among seniors across the country rose 43%, to 9.9 deaths per 100,000 population from 2019 to 2021. The rate was 6.9 deaths per 100,000 population in the U.S. the prior three years from 2016 to 2019. In Florida, early deaths rose 27% from 2019 to 2021.

Other key findings in Florida:

- Poverty up: Increased 8% between 2017 and 2021. Florida seniors now rank 38th nationwide in poverty.
- Housing cost burden: The state ranks 41 among the states for the number of seniors burdened with high housing costs. Nearly 38% cost burdened.
- Food assistance: Florida ranks No. 1 in the number of adults ages 60+ who participate in the supplemental nutrition assistance, formally known as food stamp assistance
- Food insecurity; Florida ranks 35 among the states; 13% insecure.
- Chronic conditions: Florida seniors rank 44th for multiple chronic conditions; 58% have multiple chronic conditions.
- Home health care worker numbers have gone down by 7% since 2020; 15 workers per 1,000 residents.

Below is where the state stands out for supporting its seniors:

- Community support spending: Florida ranks third. Roughly \$154 is spent per senior in the state compared to \$62 per senior in the U.S.
- High speed internet access: 86% of seniors have access to high-speed internet, which is important for telehealth appointments with medical providers. That's an increase of 4%, from 82% previously.
- Hospice care access: The state ranks second in hospice care access and use. 56% for Medicare beneficiaries.
- Cancer screenings: Florida ranks fifth for preventive screenings.
- Nursing home quality: Florida ranks 15th.
- Exercise: Florida seniors come in eighth among states for being physically active.

Here is some of the national data:

- Early death rate: Rose 22% since 2019.
- Living in poverty: 10% increase since 2019. Now 5.6 million seniors live in poverty.
- Housing burden: 32% cost burdened.
- Food assistance: Supplemental food assistance “reach” is 81%.
- Food insecurity: 12% ● Chronic conditions: 52% ● Home health care workers; 60 per 1,000 residents.
- Community support spending per senior: \$62. ● High speed internet access: 83% ● Hospice care access: Medicare beneficiaries 47%
- Cancer screenings: 76% ● Nursing home quality: 33% ● Exercise: 23% ● The healthiest states for older adults are Utah, New Hampshire, Colorado, Minnesota and Vermont.
- The states that have the most opportunity to improve? Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, West Virginia and Oklahoma.