

As one year ends, the new one presents opportunities and challenges

By André Bauer
Lt. Governor

The state fiscal year that ended June 30, with its economic downturn affecting each and every one of us personally, was especially difficult as more than \$1 billion was cut from the budget in painful increments throughout the year.

Unfortunately, the outlook for fiscal year 2010 is just as bleak, with the State Board of Economic Advisors already projecting declining revenues and an additional budget cut of 3.5%, with more incremental cuts possible throughout the year.

In 2009 state funding for the Office on Aging, which I head, was slashed 25%, from \$4 million to \$3 million. To protect senior services at the local level, we cut state office space and rent, curbed travel and supplies, and did not replace retirees. I joined all staff in taking two weeks unpaid furlough.

Throughout the year my No. 1 legislative priority had been the \$2.9 million program that provides group dining and home delivered meals to 5,400 senior citizens who are on waiting lists for services. Despite the tight budget year, and with great effort and dedication, the General Assembly worked with me to ensure those funds are continuing uncut for another year. They understood that a \$5 meal is more than nourishment that strengthens bones and muscles and steadies balance. It is insurance that someone may not fall, thus avoiding \$25,000 hospital bills or \$50,000 nursing home admissions.

Also funded was our Geriatrician Loan Forgiveness program, originally passed unanimously four years ago by the General Assembly with enthusiastic support from the Silver Haired Legislature and AARP-South Carolina. We have extended loans to 17 board-certified geriatricians, who have each agreed to stay in our state for five years, treating Medicare and Medicaid patients, in return for forgiving a portion of their medical school debt. South Carolina had less than three dozen geriatricians when we started this program.

This past year has been noteworthy because of the attention focused on Alzheimer's, whose current 80,000 patients could easily fill USC's Williams-Bryce Stadium. Another 150,000 citizens – enough to cram every college and high school stadium in our state – are family caregivers. Our Purple Ribbon task force provided the first update to our state Alzheimer's plan since Gov. Carroll Campbell created the initial one in 1993.

We also produced the Senior Fraud Prevention Resource Guide, launched the "Your Heart is in Your Hands" health and wellness initiative, and expanded the Aging and Disability Resource Centers programs. I urge you to visit my office's web site at www.aging.sc.gov to see more outstanding programs and opportunities we provide.

South Carolina now has 750,000 citizens who are now 60 years or older along with 1.3 million Baby Boomers. To meet their needs, we have developed the concept of functionally

restructuring services for the elderly and disabled now spread among seven agencies into one agency that would become the one-stop center.

Just recently, Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities issued a report about South Carolina's system of nearly 500 Community Residential Care Facilities where almost 17,000 citizens live. Overlapping roles and responsibilities of five or more state agencies, the report said, "clearly shows the need for increased, coordinated oversight of these poorly regulated facilities."

Challenges and opportunities abound, and being the head of the Office of Aging has been one of my most rewarding experiences. As your Lieutenant Governor, it makes me proud to know that the good people of the Greatest Generation are being served in their golden years and through our network they are being provided the tools to age gracefully, independently, and with dignity. I welcome you to join me in this important cause and encourage you to volunteer in your local senior center or to deliver meals to shut-ins. Like me, you will find it to be an incredibly uplifting experience.