



Alzheimer's Association and Alzheimer's Impact Movement Statement for the Record

United States House Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing on "Restoring Focus: Putting Veterans First in Community Care."

January 22, 2025

The Alzheimer's Association and Alzheimer's Impact Movement (AIM) appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement for the record for the United States House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Hearing on "Restoring Focus: Putting Veterans First in Community Care." The Association and AIM thank the Committee for its continued leadership in ensuring our nation's veterans have the proper health care and resources that are important to those who are living with Alzheimer's and other dementia and their caregivers. We also wanted to thank the Committee for the enactment of The Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (P.L. 118-210), which included several bipartisan and bicameral proposals to reform and improve the delivery of healthcare, benefits, and services at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This statement highlights the importance of dementia care and support programs at the VA and outlines how our nation's veterans living with dementia are benefiting from such programs.

Founded in 1980, the Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support, and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's and other dementia through the advancement of research, to provide and enhance care and support for all affected, and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health. AIM is the Association's advocacy affiliate, working in a strategic partnership to make Alzheimer's a national priority. Together, the Alzheimer's Association and AIM advocate for policies to fight Alzheimer's disease, including increased investment in research, improved care and support, and the development of approaches to reduce the risk of developing dementia.

Nearly half a million American veterans have Alzheimer's — and as the population ages, that number is expected to grow. In 2022, an estimated 451,000 veterans were living with Alzheimer's, and more than 130,000 new cases were diagnosed. The VA has projected the number of veterans living with Alzheimer's dementia will increase by 8.4 percent through 2033 to more than 488,000.

For veterans, the prevalence of Alzheimer's may grow even faster in future years because they have a higher risk of developing dementia. The significant increase in the number of veterans with Alzheimer's and other dementias will place a heavy burden on the VA health care system. Veterans with dementia are 2.6 times more likely to be hospitalized than other veterans — and hospital stays are, on average, 2.4 times longer. The average number of outpatient psychiatric visits is three times greater among veterans with dementia than veterans without. More than 60 percent of the VA's costs of caring for those with Alzheimer's are for nursing home care.

We are grateful for the VA's participation in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Advisory Council on Alzheimer's Research, Care, and Services, which plays a key role in developing and annually updating the National Plan to Address Alzheimer's Disease, as set forth by the National Alzheimer's Project Act (P.L. 111-375). The National Plan is a roadmap of strategies and actions of how HHS and its partners can accelerate research,

expand treatments, improve care, support people living with dementia and their caregivers, and encourage action to reduce risk factors. The most recent update to the Plan was released in December 2024 and includes several highlights on the VA's continued work to better serve our nation's veterans living with dementia. We were excited to see Congress take action in the 118th and enact the bipartisan NAPA Reauthorization Act (P.L. 118-92) and Alzheimer's Accountability and Investment Act (P.L. 118-93) that will extend the National Plan to Address Alzheimer's Disease and ensure researchers at the National Institutes of Health continue to receive the funding necessary to sustain vital Alzheimer's and dementia research. These laws will ensure the nation continues addressing Alzheimer's as a national priority, providing continuity for the community.

The VA's Continued Role in Increasing Enrollment in Clinical Trials

The VA continues to collaborate with federal agencies on a number of the key goals of the National Plan, including Action 1.B.3 to increase enrollment in clinical trials. The VA Office of Research and Development (ORD) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA) have a strong, ongoing collaboration. Among many activities, the VA and NIA have partnered on a program launched in 2020 in which the NIA provided supplemental funds to five Alzheimer's Disease Research Centers (ADRCs) co-localized with VA facilities or research centers to increase the recruitment of veterans into NIA-funded studies. Strategic priorities for the pilot include recruiting veterans, especially from diverse populations, and investigating unique risk factors for this population. Research coordinators at each participating ADRC have worked directly with the VA and NIA staff to identify and address challenges, develop pragmatic solutions, and share best practices and materials to increase veteran outreach and sustain enrollment. The pilot program successfully enrolled 99 veterans into ADRC studies, including 39 individuals from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. The project also registered 172 veterans in AD registries. The results and impact of this pilot program were published in February 2024 and laid the groundwork for future collaborations between the NIA and the VA. Lastly, tools specific to veteran recruitment have also been included in the NIA's Alzheimer's and Dementia Outreach, Recruitment, and Engagement (ADORE) repository.

The VA's Continued Role in Addressing Alzheimer's Disease in Rural Areas

The VA continues to collaborate with federal agencies on a number of the key goals of the National Plan, including Action 2.A.1 to educate health care providers on Alzheimer's disease. The VA's GeriScholars program offers staff training to integrate geriatrics into primary care practices in three training programs: (1) intensive individual training with didactics, quality improvement coaching, and clinical practicum experiences; (2) limited team-based training, including Rural Interdisciplinary Team Training (RITT); and (3) self-directed learning through webinars, simulation learning, case studies, and enduring educational materials (such as dissemination of pocket cards on dementia, delirium, and depression). VA GeriScholars includes a wide variety of training activities, many of which include or are focused on dementia training. Examples of Fiscal Year 2022 trainings include webinars such as "Treating PTSD in the Context of Cognitive Impairment," "Dementia and the Age-Friendly Health Systems Initiative: Integrating the 4M's of Mobility, Mind, Medications, and What Matters into the Care of Older Veterans", and "Enduring Education" -- as well as case studies and virtual geriatrics conferences, such as Healthcare Planning and Management for Older Adults with Dementia and Geriatric Patient with Cognitive Impairment.

We also ask that the Committee continue to support the Veterans Health Administration's 20 Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (GRECCs), which are geriatric centers of excellence focused on aging. GRECCs reported in the 2024 National Plan Update that their work included 78 research grants in dementia covering basic

science to clinical care and health services research and 25 clinical innovation projects that directly served veterans with dementia and their families. GRECC faculty have developed numerous clinical programs to aid family members and care providers, including e-Consults for Behaviors in Dementia, Health Care Directives for Veterans with Dementia, Reaching Out to Rural Caregivers and Veterans with Dementia Utilizing Clinical Video-Telehealth, and Virtual Dementia Caregiver Support Programs. The GRECC Program produced 56 educational programs for staff and trainees on best practices in dementia care, including the use of simulation technology to demonstrate techniques for communication and facilitating activities of daily living for veterans with dementia. Finally, GRECC authors published 259 manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals in Fiscal Year 2022 on their research and clinical work in dementia. The VA must continue supporting the GRECCs in disseminating findings from this research to integrate scientifically-proven dementia interventions into local and rural communities.

Educating Health Care Providers in the Indian Health Service and Tribal Care Systems

The VA also continues to collaborate with the Indian Health Service (IHS) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the National Plan Action 2.A.6 to strengthen the ability of primary care teams in Indian country to meet the needs of people with Alzheimer's and related dementias and their caregivers. For example, in 2022, the IHS launched the Indian Health GeriScholars Pilot, developed with the support and collaboration of the VA Office of Rural Health. Modeled after the highly successful VA GeriScholars Program that has built geriatric expertise into the primary care workforce over the past decade, the Indian Health GeriScholars pilot is providing primary care clinicians at IHS, Tribal, and Urban Indian Organizations (UIO) programs with an individual intensive learning track for professional continuing education, including a week-long intensive training in geriatrics through an approved Geriatrics Board Review course, mentored geriatric improvement project at their local facility, mentorship in geriatric practice, and ongoing education, training, and peer support as an Indian Health GeriScholar.

During the pilot's first two years, 31 providers and pharmacists at 28 sites across 10 IHS areas participated in training and finished projects focused on detecting and diagnosing dementia, medication safety, fall prevention, and other locally relevant topics. Demand increased for the 2024 cohort to include eight physicians, one nurse practitioner, and 14 pharmacists from 21 sites, representing seven IHS areas. The Indian Health GeriScholars are encouraged to participate in the educational offerings available to the VA GeriScholars.

These are only a few examples of ways in which the VA remains involved in working to ensure a high-quality, well-trained dementia care workforce and continue bridging the gap in cognitive services in rural areas. The National Alzheimer's Project Act as a whole has led to great achievements in the treatment and research of Alzheimer's disease, and we are looking forward to seeing more progress in the 119th Congress.

Conclusion

The Alzheimer's Association and AIM appreciate the Committee's steadfast support for veterans and their caregivers and the continued commitment to advancing issues important to the millions of military families affected by Alzheimer's and other dementia. We look forward to working with the Committee and other members of Congress in a bipartisan way to advance policies that will ensure access to high-quality dementia care and support in rural areas, especially as the population of veterans living with dementia continues to grow.