

Illinois Chapter Network

Public Hearing
Illinois Chronic Disease and Health Promotion
November 15, 2010

My name is Erna Colborn and I am President and CEO of the Alzheimer's Association -- Greater Illinois Chapter. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about Alzheimer's disease and health promotion.

Alzheimer's disease is the most under-recognized public health crisis of the 21st century. There are as many as 5.3 million persons today living with Alzheimer's, which is the most common form of dementia. Alzheimer's is a disease that destroys brain cells and causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior. It is not a normal part of aging. Today it is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States.

One in eight Americans aged 65 and older have Alzheimer's - and another American develops Alzheimer's every 70 seconds. Unless something is done, by 2050, up to 16 million Americans will have Alzheimer's, and a new case will be diagnosed every 33 seconds. Currently in Illinois, the number of persons with Alzheimer's is 210,000, and that number is expected to increase by 14% over the next fifteen years.

Although the cause or causes of Alzheimer's disease are not yet known, most experts agree that Alzheimer's, like other common chronic conditions, probably develops as a result of multiple factors rather than a single cause. An increasing role by public health officials provides a new front in addressing cognitive health in our society. We are well aware that cognitive health is a vital part of healthy aging and quality of life. The lack of cognitive health will not only have a significant impact on a person's well-being and overall health status but that of a community and our state as well.

The rising incidence of Alzheimer's and related dementias is a public health battle that we in Illinois must be prepared to respond to with services and resources to support the person with the disease, their family and caregivers.

We applaud Illinois' dedication to the use of surveillance as a public health tool to develop data on the incidence, prevalence, and risk factors for particular diseases, and, when risk factors are identified, to support the development of strategies to reduce risk. Surveillance at the state or community level can identify "hot spots" where resources could be deployed in order to reduce incidence and prevalence and bend the cost curves of diseases.

In cooperation with the CDC, Illinois conducts a vital annual public health surveillance survey, known as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). We are very pleased that in 2009 the state included an optional module on caregiving in the BRFSS survey for that year. And we are even more pleased that the Cognitive Impairment module will be included in the survey conducted in 2011.

Effective surveillance on cognitive impairment and caregiving produces state information about: (1) the impact of cognitive impairment across the population; (2) the number of family caregivers who are taking care of someone with Alzheimer's or another dementia; and (3) the age, income, living arrangements, health problems, and other characteristics of those with the condition and their caregivers. This information would be extremely valuable for many purposes, including:

- to support and guide campaigns to increase public awareness about Alzheimer's and dementia and the societal impact of these conditions;
- to help policy makers understand that Alzheimer's disease, cognitive impairment, and caregiving are major public health problems that require focused planning and new interventions to reduce risk and societal impact; and
- to support collaboration with Illinois' public health department to include Alzheimer's and dementia as part of their prevention initiatives on other serious medical conditions, including hypertension, diabetes, and stroke, especially among African-Americans and Latinos.

We soon will have state-specific valuable data to identify the impact of Alzheimer's and other conditions on Illinois' citizens and to highlight the need for planning interventions, programs and services in Illinois to reduce the risk and impact.

With this in mind, the Alzheimer's Association supports the inclusion of these two optional modules in the Illinois' Public Health Surveillance program on a continuing regular basis. Let 2009 and 2011 be the start of regular surveillance on these important issues.

The incidence of Alzheimer's is rising. We need to know its impact in Illinois in order to provide a sound public health policy response, knowing that a strategic response to the emerging public health crisis of Alzheimer's will be needed to protect all Illinois citizens.

Thank you.