

My name is Abby Palaza. I am from Colchester, and I am a Senior at UVM majoring in Health Sciences. I am here to speak in support of the State Dementia Coordinator position that is in the FY24 House budget. I have three specific areas that inform my belief in the value of this position.

First, here with me today are my mother and father. At age 50 my dad was diagnosed with Younger Onset. At this time both of my parents were working, and I was a full-time student. Within the three years following the diagnosis my family has had to transition from work to retirement, manage financial and legal matters, and adopt full-time caregiving roles all while supporting each other through the emotional journey of this disease. The addition of navigating resources meant to help us felt overwhelming.

Second, I work as an LNA in memory care. I see first-hand the complexities of dementia, the strain it puts on systems of care, and the challenges it places on families and the workforce. In my experience, person-centered care has had more positive outcomes when there is a consistent workforce, dementia-specific training and an environment that creates relationship building opportunities with patients. With these systems in place, I have seen how unnecessary stress on the patient, worker, and their families can be reduced.

Third, I have conducted research at UVM with nationally representative data and findings reveal low use of external support services by caregivers and low participation of people with dementia in organized activities. Thus, there is a pressing need to increase access to a holistic system that will provide wrap-around services for people with dementia and their caregivers.

I believe a State Dementia Coordinator is vital if we are going to create a sustainable, affordable, and humane system for those living with dementia at all ages. I ask this Committee to support this position in the fiscal year 24 budget.