

**Testimony on S.206, Committee on Health and Human Services
Rhonda Williams, Vermont Department of Health
April 6, 2022**

Thank you for continuing the discussion of the important topic of addressing Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD), healthy aging and the needs of Vermonters including those facing cognitive impairment. The Health Department's **Alzheimer's Disease and Healthy Aging Program** which administers the CDC-funded BOLD grant to address Alzheimer's Disease and brain health aligns with VDH's mission to protect and promote the best health for all Vermonters. I'm honored to be here to share our progress thus far.

The BOLD grant is intended to create an infrastructure to address dementia from a public health approach in collaboration with other programs, state agencies, community partners and Vermonters with lived experience. VDH's efforts to address ADRD started over five years ago and is what VT's BOLD grant builds upon. Under Commissioner Levine and then DAIL Commissioner Hutt's leadership in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association and members of the Governor's Commission on ADRD, we started preparing for the work by:

- Participating in a Brain Health Learning Collaborative with the Association of State and Territorial Health Organizations.
- Publishing a brief Action Plan on Alzheimer's Disease and Healthy Aging 2018-2019. We collaborated with DAIL and used the CDC's Roadmap for State and Local Public Health: Brain Health Initiative. This roadmap serves as the guide for our current efforts, which we conduct using grant funds and collaborative efforts.
- Organizing learning sessions with office of local health and the central office, including experiential learning on what it is like to have Alzheimer's and a Public Health Grand Rounds on dementia with Dr. Michael LaMantia, Vermont's expert on aging.
- Responding to partners' data requests. With funds from the national office of the Alzheimer's Association, we set out to collect subjective cognitive decline and caregiver modules and brain injury and alcohol and medication misuse data.
- Facilitating an Alzheimer's and Healthy Aging group with DAIL and VDH colleagues in chronic disease, surveillance, substance use, injury prevention and Emergency Response.

These actions were instrumental in making our state a successful applicant to CDC's competitive funding opportunity called **BOLD**, which stands **for Building Our Largest Dementia Infrastructure**. In May of 2020 we applied as a core state (which means we were in the earlier

stage of effort than enhanced states). In the initial funding supplied by Congress to the CDC, just 16 states and territories were selected with another 7 entities added last year.

The BOLD award to the Department of Health, Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (HPDP) started in Sept 2020 and awards \$250,000 annually for 3 years, ending in September of 2023. This grant is primarily a planning grant although action is expected in hiring staff including a program manager and performing data collection, communications, partnership development, dementia education, and training.

This funding is intended to build a state's capacity to address Alzheimer's and brain health as an urgent public health issue using evidence-based strategies from the **Healthy Brain Initiative Roadmap to Address Dementia** that I mentioned previously. The strategies we selected to focus on in Vermont support healthy aging and address health inequities in the State Health Improvement Plan. In these areas I'd like to share some of the projects we are working on:

Health Promotion: We are working with a HPDP contractor, Hark, on communications to connect Vermonters to services and resources that can improve brain health. Last fall was our first brain health campaign, integrating brain health messages into [My Healthy VT](#). The campaign was successful. 31 Vermonters registered for a diabetes prevention class. Such promotion is vital; only 46% of Vermonters have discussed concerns of cognition and memory loss with their doctor. An important component of our work is to normalize the conversation and reduce the fear and stigma associated with dementia. The program plans to promote the annual Medicare Wellness Visit that includes cognitive screening and diagnosis.

Prevention: CDC calls upon states to work with its chronic disease and substance use prevention partners including alcohol and tobacco programs, because lifestyle modifications that reduce risk for many chronic diseases also protect and improve brain health.

Data Collection: In 2020 we were successful in starting a **healthy aging data collection plan** primarily focused on the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System or BRFSS. Our plan is to field every year the subjective cognitive decline or the caregiver module along with questions on sleep, substance misuse, hearing loss and brain injury that help us to understand brain health and dementia risk among all Vermonters. You can find our data brief on Risk Factors for Subjective Cognitive Decline at VDH's page [BRFSS Data Briefs](#). In collaboration with DAHL, we are sharing a surveillance position, co-funding a full-time analyst to expand our capacity to use various data sources and more thoroughly assess and disseminate aging-related data. Julie Skarha, PhD, will join our team mid-May and will serve both VDH and DAHL efforts on healthy aging, dementia risk reduction, aging services and dementia caregiver supports.

Evaluation: The BOLD Program works with HPDP's evaluation contractor, Professional Data Analysts or PDA. With PDA we are engaging multiple stakeholders for creating a new **Action Plan on Alzheimer's, Related Dementias and Healthy Aging**. We wanted to have an evaluator's neutrality to help people feel comfortable with providing input on what they would like to see in a state plan and to help us update it annually. We have held over 10 engagement sessions

including with the Governor's Commission, the AHS Abenaki Ethics Workgroup, Area Agencies on Aging, and organizations who work closely with low-income Vermonters. This new state plan on ADRD and Healthy Aging 2022-2024 will be shared broadly and guide our collaborative work.

We are also evaluating the Hub and Spoke ADRD project, which is a workgroup that DAIL and VDH co-facilitate. Together with key partners including the UVM Memory Program, UVMMC, School of Nursing, Hospital and Health Systems Association, Blueprint for Health, and Bi-State Primary Care Association we are providing training and tools for primary care providers to screen, diagnose and care for Vermonters with Alzheimer's or other form of dementia and their families. The workgroup's objective is to increase local screening and diagnosis, thereby reducing the wait time for families to receive treatment and supports. We believe that over time Vermont's dementia-related hospitalizations can be reduced. I can share this Hub and Spoke ADRD evaluation brief with you and the measures we are monitoring.

In summary, BOLD's objective is to address Alzheimer's and other dementias as a public health priority in collaboration with diverse partners. We need to have adequate data, communications, partnership coordination and evaluation capacity to advance the effort, address brain health inequities, and to communicate our impact.

Thank you again for your interest in this important issue as it brings to light the importance of addressing ADRD, a growing public health challenge nationally and in our state. We will continue to look for funding to address Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias, improve brain health through risk reduction, address stigma and support those with dementia. This is a public health priority for us.

I'm happy to answer any questions.