

**Testimony on S.206, Senate Committee on Health and Welfare  
Rhonda Williams, Vermont Department of Health  
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Thank you for the committee's discussion of the important topic of addressing Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia (ADRD) and healthy aging. The Health Department's **Alzheimer's Disease and Healthy Aging Program** which administers the 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 community partners and Vermonters with lived experience. VDH's efforts to address ADRD started several 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 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD), we started preparing for the work by:

- Participating in a Brain Health Learning Collaborative with the Association of State and Health Territorial Organizations.
- Publishing a brief Action Plan on Alzheimer's Disease and Healthy Aging 2018-2019. We collaborated with DAIL and used the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Roadmap on Brain Health.
- 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 Grand Rounds
- 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, 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. This grant is

primarily a planning grant although action is expected in hiring staff and performing data collection, communications, partnership development, 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: State and Local Partnerships to Address Dementia Roadmap** and with strategies to 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.

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 Decline at VDH's page [BRFSS Data Briefs](#).

Evaluation: we work with HPDP's contractor for evaluation which is with 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. We have held over 10 engagement sessions including with the Governor's Commission, the AHS Abenaki Working Group, Area Agencies on Aging, and OLH Chronic Disease staff and with organizations who work closely with low-income Vermonters. We are also evaluating the Hub and Spoke ADRD project, which was mentioned last week. DAIL, VDH and health system partners are working to increase screening, early diagnosis, and care among primary care statewide.

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

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.

Our new state plan on Alzheimer's and Healthy Aging 2022-2024 will be shared broadly and guide collaborative work. We intend this to be a living document open to changing and expanding with input and new resources. We will continue to look for funding to address Alzheimer's Disease, brain health and risk reduction as a public health priority in Vermont.

Thank you again for your interest in this important issue. I'm happy to answer any questions.