Opening Statement
Senator Susan M. Collins
Special Committee on Aging

"Finding a Cure: Assessing Progress Toward the Goal of Ending Alzheimer's by 2015"

April 6, 2016

Good afternoon. I am convening this hearing today to assess our progress in combating Alzheimer's disease since the enactment of the National Alzheimer's Project Act, which I co-authored with my friend and former colleague, Senator Evan Bayh.

As the many family members and advocates here today can attest, Alzheimer's is a devastating disease that exacts a tremendous personal and economic toll on individuals, families, and our health care system. The Centers for Disease Control lists Alzheimer's as the sixth leading cause of death in our country. Other estimates put it at number three on the list of deadliest diseases, behind only cancer and heart disease.

Approximately 5.4 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's today, including 37,000 in the state of Maine. That number is soaring as our overall population grows older and lives longer. If current trends continue, Alzheimer's disease could affect as many as 16 million Americans by the year 2050.

In addition to the human suffering it causes, Alzheimer's is our nation's costliest disease. The United States spends more than $236 billion per year, including $160 billion in costs to the Medicare and Medicaid programs caring for people with Alzheimer's. It is the only one of our nation's top ten diseases without an effective means of prevention, treatment, or a cure. If we do nothing, the Alzheimer's Association forecasts that the disease will cost the United States an astonishing $1.1 trillion by 2050.

Despite these alarming statistics, for too long our efforts to fight this devastating disease lacked coordination and focus. It was not until the National Alzheimer's Project Act, known as NAPA, became law in 2011 that a strategic national plan to combat Alzheimer's was created, and it has since been updated annually. NAPA focuses our efforts to accelerate progress toward better treatments, a means of prevention, and ultimately, a cure.

We have taken many encouraging steps in the past five years since NAPA became law, as our panelists will discuss today. This hearing presents the opportunity for a progress check – where are we in our fight against Alzheimer's, and what more must we do in order to achieve our goals by the year 2025?

The experts have calculated that $2 billion a year in research funding is needed to achieve our goal of preventing and treating Alzheimer's by the year 2025. Last year, we were able to celebrate tremendous progress. Many of us advocated strongly for a $350 million increase for Alzheimer's research, and it became law. And it would not have become law without the determined advocacy of all of the people in this room and back home who backed our efforts. So I thank you for that. This is the largest increase in history, and it brings our total nearly halfway to the $2 billion goal.

Compared to its human and economic toll, however, funding for Alzheimer's and other dementias still remains disproportionately low. Other serious diseases receive annual funding of $2 billion, $3 billion, and even more than $5 billion, and those investments have paid dividends in the form of new treatments and declining death rates.

There is also promising research that holds hope for Alzheimer's patients and their families. The research community is making strides through clinical trials with new therapeutic targets. We simply must provide adequate funding to advance this research.

While the nearly 60 percent increase in funding for Alzheimer's research is welcome and significant, this is no time to take our foot off of the accelerator.

The increasing number of Alzheimer's cases has dire implications for our federal budget. The average Medicare payment for an individual with Alzheimer's is three times higher than for those without the condition. For Medicaid, the average payments are 19 times higher. Failure to achieve progress in the fight against this disease will bankrupt our federal and state health care programs.

As we tackle Alzheimer's complexities, we must never forget the family caregivers, who are truly heroes. Our caregivers make many personal and financial sacrifices to ensure that their loved ones have the care that they need.

When I was in Maine recently, I saw an 88-year-old woman taking care of her 90-year-old husband with Alzheimer's; I talked to a woman in her 50's who, with her sisters, is juggling the care of their mother with their work schedules; and I spoke with an elderly husband trying to cope with his own health problems as well as his wife's dementia.

Chances are, sooner or later, most of us will either be family caregivers or be someone who needs one.

America's caregivers enable many living with Alzheimer's to remain in their own homes.

NAPA places an important focus on Alzheimer's disease care and services, and caregivers serve on the Advisory Council. To supplement these worthy efforts, I have introduced bipartisan legislation modeled after NAPA that would require the Department of Health and Human Services to develop a national strategy to recognize and support our more than 40 million family caregivers. It's called the RAISE Family Caregivers Act, which I introduced with Senator Baldwin. I'm pleased to report that it passed the Senate unanimously, and it now awaits action in the House. So to add to the "to-do list" of all the advocates in the audience today, and I welcome all of you, I would urge you to ask your representatives in the House to pass the RAISE Act without further delay.

By supporting family caregivers, we can assist more people with Alzheimer's to live at home where they want to be, we can help to delay or prevent more costly institutional care and unnecessary hospitalizations. But caregivers need our help through much more respite care and home health services.

Again I want to thank the wonderful panel of witnesses that we have with us today and all of the advocates who have come from around the country to make the case for more research funding and for further progress in helping our caregivers.

Finally, let me note that I understand from the Alzheimer's Associations and affiliated groups that there are more than a thousand people in Washington today lobbying on behalf of those with Alzheimer's.

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