

Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL)
Aging Committee on Alzheimer's Opening Statement
Washington, DC
Wednesday, March 25, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for calling today's hearing. With the number of Americans living with Alzheimer's disease expected to increase as our population becomes increasingly older, the need to address it has become more and more important. Almost half of Americans over 85 are afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. With no cure and limited treatment options, I am looking forward to hearing about how we might improve the ways we treat the disease and minimize its impact on our nation's families.

Because Alzheimer's is a progressive disease, its effects are often felt far beyond households and the facilities where treatment is administered. In many cases, the effects can reach an entire community. Finding ways to provide the special care and attention necessary for this devastating disease has been a primary goal of cities and states across the nation. Community organizations have sprung up to offer support, care, and education to patients, caregivers, medical professionals, and members of the community.

In my home state of Florida, officials at all levels of government coordinated to develop a system known as the **Silver Alert**. The system helps to offer a uniform response and cater to the unique needs of individuals like those suffering from Alzheimer's. The first Silver Alert was issued in October 2008 and has since led to the direct rescue of 9 elderly Floridians as of last week. By knowing some of the symptoms of dementia, like wandering and confusion, Florida's communities have been able to work together to improve response and stand ready to assist seniors with special needs.

States like Florida have become a model for the nation. To encourage other states to adopt similar programs, I joined Chairman Kohl in co-sponsoring legislation to bring Silver Alert to a national level. The legislation would improve coordination among law enforcement agencies across jurisdictions to find missing loved ones in need of special care. The bill has already been passed by the House and is currently before the Senate Judiciary committee.

Support from the medical research community is another element critical to addressing Alzheimer's. Universities and other research institutions are

working to improve understanding of the disease and are developing drugs, therapies, and other interventions to treat and slow the disease.

Health care communities have sought to establish best practices for working with patients and caregivers. Many include evidence-based models for patient care and caregiver support. As a result, some patients living with Alzheimer's are staying at home longer with family and loved ones.

Medical researchers have developed a number of the ways to relieve the burden placed on families caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's. One of the ways is through the use of assistive technologies. One example of this includes a talking alarm reminding the patient to take medication on time. Another is a scale hooked into the Internet so it can send weight and other vital signs to care providers.

Nationally, organizations have formed to provide information and advocacy, such as the Alzheimer's Association. These organizations help raise the nation's awareness about the disease and support efforts at the federal level to improve the care patients receive.

For all of the advances that have been made to assist Alzheimer's patients, their caregivers, and their loved ones, there is still much more that can be done. Right now, the U.S. does not have a coordinated system for long-term care. People seeking information or services are confronted with a disjointed and complex web of public and private options. In some cases, they encounter criminals who know how to defraud a patient or family in crisis. These concerns are shared with those living with Alzheimer's and many of America's seniors.

I'm looking forward to hearing testimony from our witnesses today, and want to thank them for being here. I also want to thank all the caregivers, health professionals, community leaders and providers who are here. Every day you work to help our loved ones living with Alzheimer's receive the best care possible.

I look forward to working together to find ways to understand a disease that affects so many families in our nation.

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I would like to say a few words about Larry Butcher, Chair of the Board of Directors, Alzheimer's Community Care, Inc. Larry discovered the organization in late 1999 as an overwhelmed caregiver who needed to have support, guidance and hands on intervention that was dementia specific. Jeannette, his beloved wife, had been diagnosed in 1995, at age 55 with a form of Alzheimer's disease.

Larry has served on the Board of Directors of Alzheimer's Community Care since April 2001. He has served as Chair of the Board of Directors since July 2007. He was appointed by Governor Jeb Bush as a member of the Florida Alzheimer's Disease Initiative Advisory Council in 2005 and was reappointed in 2007. He served as Chair of the Advisory Council in 2007 and 2008 and remains a member. Larry also facilitates a weekly support group that has an average attendance of 25 plus caregivers.

Thank you, Larry, for joining us here today.