

## *Healthy Aging from a Policy Perspective*

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**Claire Erickson, M.P.A./PH.D. Candidate, Madison, WI**

### **The Next Generation of Researchers**

From a young age, Claire Erickson was fascinated with the brain. Assigned a non-fiction book report in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, her chosen book about how the brain processes and interprets information blew her mind. The field of neuroscience was fortunate that from that point forward, that was Claire's passion. “I find the fundamental features of the brain fascinating,” Claire shared. “The field has more questions than answers and research is a key way we can make advances.”



### **Bringing Aging and Science Together**

Claire is a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She completed her Master's Degree in Public Affairs (M.P.A.) in 2019 and is finishing her Ph.D. in Neuroscience. “I wanted to bring aging science and aging policy together,” Claire shared. “I'm interested in the preclinical phase of Alzheimer's disease and characterizing brain changes that occur during this time, to hopefully implement effective treatment options.”

She works at the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) at UW-Madison, as a Graduate Research Assistant. The center was established in 2009 with funding from the National Institute on Aging. The Wisconsin ADRC is part of a national network of scientists who are working toward the common goal of preventing and effectively treating Alzheimer's disease.

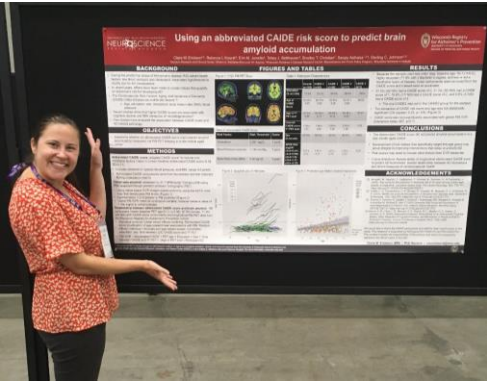
Through her collegiate career, Claire has been involved with the Alzheimer's Association. With her focus on Alzheimer's research, she wanted to network with other aging groups, making an impact for those living with dementia. Through her work at the ADRC, she has supported the Alzheimer's Association with awareness efforts, Walk to End Alzheimer's®, Wisconsin Advocacy Days and attended legislative meetings with policy makers to advance Alzheimer's priorities. She has also participated in the Alzheimer's Association International Conference® (AAIC), an event dedicated to advancing dementia science.

### **Why I Advocate**

With a research background, Claire provides a different perspective on Advocacy, over a traditional caregiver. She shared that, while funding for Alzheimer's research is a critical message to legislators, she has a slightly different agenda in her efforts. “There's no doubt that research – making discoveries and translational research (the bridge between science and practice) – is a critical message to reach legislators,” shared Claire. “However, I'm more interested in bringing a research *perspective* into advocacy. For caregivers, they can impact change in sharing how their family is impacted by dementia. For me, I can impact change by providing a biological discussion of the disease. I'm trying to occupy a different space than some advocates, to make additional advances.” In Claire's meeting with legislators, her ability to answer questions with a research nomenclature

allows her to shed light on things in a different way. With many basic questions, such as the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's, she can help educate legislators in a different way.

Claire has a personal connection to her research endeavors. Her grandfather passed away 2010 and was living with cognitive decline the last few years of his life. She has also had some family members with cognitive impairment and dementia. "Watching the impact of dementia on family members and its toll on surrounding loved ones has played a role in my interest in neurodegeneration," Claire shared.



## Get Involved in Advocacy

Claire encourages more individuals to get involved in advocacy. "The number of people impacted by dementia is growing. If you are lucky enough to have not been touched, that will likely change as the aging population (65+) expands. This is a vulnerable population and advocacy is so important for maintaining their dignity, choice and care. Being able to keep their priorities at the forefront for our legislators is imperative. There's a lot of space for growth and improvement to be made for supporting those with dementia on their journey."

## New Endeavors in Preclinical Studies

At the age of only 25, Claire is having a significant impact on the field of dementia research. Her research focus is understanding preclinical Alzheimer's disease. "This is a huge area that is coming into play," Claire shared. "From a policy perspective, aging and Alzheimer's disease is an area we need more focus on. How we care for these people, how we protect them from discrimination, and how we support aging with autonomy is crucial."

Most recently, Claire is working on a perspective piece she will have published in *Alzheimer's & Dementia: Diagnosis, Assessment, & Disease Monitoring*, an Alzheimer's Association journal. The focus of her paper provides a discussion on the disclosure of Alzheimer's biomarkers to individuals who are not yet experiencing symptoms of dementia, and if there is a window of time where an intervention may delay or prevent dementia onset.

The Alzheimer's Association salutes Claire and her passion for research and advocacy. We support her endeavors to help us find the first survivor of Alzheimer's disease.