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Alzheimer's advocates: More must be done in Southern Indiana

Sipes, Clere speak at event aimed at raising awareness

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NEW ALBANY — As the first Baby Boomers approach age 65, Alzheimer's Association officials warn that the disease will explode, both in numbers and cost, during the next 20 years if strides aren't made in its treatment.

"Alzheimer's is going to overwhelm our systems if we don't do something about it," said Ellen Kershaw, the association's vice president of public policy for the Greater Kentucky and Southern Indiana chapter.

The association hosted a public meeting Tuesday at Floyd Memorial Hospital and Health Services that included advocates and a pair of New Albany state legislators — Sen. Connie Sipes, a Democrat, and Republican Rep. Ed Clere.

After Kershaw said family and friends provided more than 182 million hours of unpaid care in Indiana to dementia patients valued at more than \$2 billion, Clere said lawmakers need to show appreciation.

"We're going to have to find a way to make it easier for families and we're going to have to find a way to recognize the value of the care," he said. "I'm not sure we are doing anywhere close to an adequate job of that now."

Clere explained that he and his family brought his in-laws from northeastern Indiana to live with them in 2006 after they both developed medical problems, including his mother-in-law, Jeanne McCord's Alzheimer's diagnosis.

"It was daunting for us many, many times, and I see we have to make that easier." Clere said. "In my non-legislative life I'm a real estate broker and I've also seen this through the lens of a lot of clients coping with aging parents."



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Clere suggested exploring tax breaks for caregivers so they could modify homes that could possibly keep many from institutionalized care.

Founder and executive director of the Volunteer Caregivers Program, Karen Robinson, also spoke at the meeting about the importance of support for the caregiver. The program is a permanent research program through the University of Louisville that aims to educate and support caregivers before they become overwhelmed.

"We are trying to get to the caregiver before they are so much in crisis that they are looking for a nursing home," she said.

Since it started in 1997, the free program has served more than 190 families, Robinson said.

Sipes, who also shared her story of having a relative with Alzheimer's, touted a new Silver Alert program for missing senior citizens, much like the Amber Alert system that the General Assembly passed this last session. It will go into law July 1.

"Because of the 60 percent of persons with Alzheimer's will wander at some point during the course of that disease, safety is very much of a concern," Kershaw said. "The way that the association looks at it is 'here is another tool that could be available that could be available to law enforcement when someone goes missing.'"

Kershaw said the association was especially happy with the provision that requires law enforcement officials to receive training on how to deal with elderly who may be in trouble.

Sipes also assured the audience the state-funded CHOICE program — which she credited with helping "thousands of elderly Hoosiers remain as independent as possible at home" — would be safe from cuts lawmakers must make when they begin to craft the state budget starting June 11.

"This is a very tight economic time," she said. "And I don't look for the funding to increase, but I don't look for it to decrease either," she said.

Though she and her colleagues will face decisions on programs, Sipes said lawmakers will think about the state's oldest residents.

"It is a priority certainly to help our seniors ... and I know that in our budget [discussions] we will keep that [a priority] in our minds," she said.

SO YOU KNOW

- An estimated 5.3 million people have Alzheimer's disease, with more than 100,000 cases in Indiana.
- There is a new case every 70 seconds.
- Nationwide, there are an estimated 9.9 million unpaid caregivers.
- Alzheimer's is the seventh-leading cause of death in the U.S. and fifth-leading cause for those over 65.

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- By 2050, the number of Americans with the disease is expected to grow to 16 million.

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