

Strengthening Community-Clinical Linkages Through Community Input

Knox County Health Department

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Quick Summary

Centering lived experience to improve dementia care pathways

The Knox County Health Department gathered input from community members, caregivers and health care providers to better understand local needs and gaps in awareness of available resources for people living with dementia. These insights informed stronger cross-sector partnerships and the development of referral pathways, improving coordination between clinical care and community-based services and enhancing access to dementia detection, diagnosis and support.

Communities across the United States are experiencing a steady demographic shift as the population ages, yet many older adults are aging without adequate support. For those living with dementia, their caregivers and families, access to timely diagnosis, coordinated care and community-based support is critical. Public health departments play an essential role in linking clinical care with community-based services.

In Knox County, Tennessee, the local impact of dementia — and the lived experiences of people living with dementia and their caregivers — had not been well documented. In response, **Knox County Health Department (KCHD)** sought to better understand community perceptions of dementia and local needs as part of the **Healthy Brain Initiative (HBI) Road Map Strategist Program 2023** cohort. KCHD used these insights to strengthen partnerships and improve community-clinical linkages to improve access to detection and diagnostic services.

Understanding Needs of the Community and Workforce

KCHD assessed the local landscape of brain health, dementia and caregiving to inform planning and workforce development. The department implemented a multifaceted approach to gather input

from community members, caregivers and health and long-term care professionals.

- » **Assessing the community:** KCHD conducted a comprehensive community assessment to identify what was known about dementia among the general public as well as how existing data could be integrated into ongoing work.
- » **Convening local experts and partners:** KCHD convened an interdisciplinary advisory workgroup

HBI Road Map Strategist Program

Building local leadership to advance the public health approach to dementia

The Healthy Brain Initiative (HBI) Road Map Strategist Program supports **local health departments** in advancing the public health approach to brain health, dementia and caregiving. Through funding, education and technical assistance, the program equips experienced public health professionals to **serve as systems change agents** guided by the [HBI State and Local Road Map for Public Health, 2023-2027](#).

The HBI Road Map Strategist Program is led by the Alzheimer's Association in partnership with the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO).

of partners from the county Office on Aging, academia, research, health systems, community-based organizations and community members. The workgroup identified opportunities for collaboration and supported the content development and review for the focus groups (see below).

- » **Surveying providers:** KCHD developed a provider survey to gather clinical input, showing that practitioners are hesitant to discuss cognitive impairment due to concerns about stigma. The survey also found that providers wanted additional training about detection and diagnosis.
- » **Collecting community-informed input:** With partners, KCHD facilitated six focus groups with people living with dementia and their caregivers. The focus groups provided insights for health care providers to better understand the experiences and needs of people living with dementia, and their caregivers. A key finding was the disconnect between knowledge of available resources and their utilization. KCHD published these findings in the [HBI Focus Group Report, April 2024](#).

Impact and Sustainability

Participation in the HBI Road Map Strategist Program strengthened KCHD's long-term commitment to brain health and deepened engagement with local and state partners. Locally, KCHD was selected by the Alzheimer's Association BOLD Public Health Center of Excellence on Dementia Risk Reduction to host a [Community Convening](#), a local meeting of community members and partner organizations about incorporating brain health into existing initiatives. At the state level, KCHD expanded its partnerships with the Tennessee Dementia Action Collaborative, which works across the state to support people living with dementia and their caregivers while strengthening the dementia-capable workforce.

To sustain momentum, the department developed a centralized healthy aging webpage, established a formal partnership between KCHD and the Office on Aging, and became an age-friendly public health system.

"We were able to gather really valuable input from those responses and from the focus groups...we ended up identifying 10 key themes. Through these themes, we were able to identify a disconnect between existing resources and the knowledge that we had readily available."

-Julia Holland
Knox County Health Department,
2023 HBI Road Map Strategist

Further, KCHD is exploring opportunities to integrate brain health into established community-based education.

Lessons Learned

- » **Start with knowledge and education:** The HBI Road Map Strategist emphasized the importance of being willing to learn. Beginning with limited knowledge, the Strategist built a foundational understanding of dementia over the course of the program allowing better facilitation with community partners and health care providers.
- » **Build strong, sustainable partnerships:** These partnerships are necessary for short- and long-term success. Integrating brain health into local priorities — such as the workplace wellness programs of local businesses — was an effective entry point to build awareness and share community resources.
- » **Solicit diverse perspectives:** KCHD sought out clinical perspectives to better understand dementia and diagnosis, and align with community-based support. Bridging clinical and public health perspectives results in stronger community-clinical linkages and a more responsive, person-centered system of care.

Learn more about the public health approach to dementia at alz.org/publichealth



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