March 14, 2025

Senate Chair Ingwersen, House Chair Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Linda Whitten, a resident of Gorham, Maine and I am a Community Program Educator for the Alzheimer's Association.

Deciding to retire is a big step – one that is exciting, well-deserved and a little scary – all at the same time.
As I was closing my professional career chapter in my Human Resources career, it was very clear to me that I wanted to be sure my next chapter was one where I could give back and make a difference. Truth be told, I will be celebrating 11 years as a Breast Cancer Survivor in May. I serve on the Maine Impact Cancer Network Taskforce providing educational and support programs to survivors and those living with cancer – giving back to others who helped me and allowed me to be here today with all of you.

However, I am here to share an unexpected journey with you.

In the late Spring of 2023, it became apparent to my husband and I that our neighbor's demeanor and cognitive capacity was a bit off. Having known her for many years, we noticed she wasn't riding her bicycle or taking her daily walks. She was an avid tennis player, went to the gym and lived a full life. All of that was changing. Her walks would find her in my backyard or at my doorstep confused as to how to find her way home. She would misplace her keys and lock herself out of the house. Her husband was very protective and private and cared for his wife who was struggling with dementia. He did this all on his own – perhaps as a doting husband, as his role – in good times, in bad times, in sickness and in health. He was a very proud man. Later in the Fall of 2023, he passed away leaving his wife alone and not capable of taking care of herself. He had been her caregiver, juggling caring for her, shopping for her, taking her to doctor's appointments and working a full-time job. Her family asked if I would help transition their mom, my neighbor, to a Memory Care Facility. Agreeing to do so and supporting her journey and end of life is something I hold dear to my heart. I promised her I wouldn't leave her side and I kept my promise to her.

Their story is like many stories of proud Mainers taking care of their loved ones – compassionately, dutifully and privately. Being a caregiver of a loved one who has dementia is more than a full-time job. Dementia robs the person of who they are slowly, as it is a progressive disease. Those who have the disease are saying goodbye to those around them – The Longest Goodbye. Imagine for a moment not remembering how to get dressed, brush your teeth or shower. Imagine losing the ability to recognize your family members, read the newspaper and participate in everyday activities. Imagine not being able to remember where you placed something and then not remembering what you misplaced. Imagine not knowing you have asked the same questions or said the same thing over and over. Now imagine the role of the caregiver – they have the longest day. They are the stoic heroes ensuring their loved one's well-being, care and safety. Providing caregivers with resources for their self-care is critical. Being able to take a break, to visit with friends, to do things to recharge yourself are things that we do every day. We need to provide the same for our caregivers. To take care of others, we need to be able to take care of ourselves – everyone loses out if that is not the case. Caregiving is rewarding and taxing at the same time.

Respite care will provide caregivers with resources to make sure priorities stay focused. Funding can allow caregivers to check a few things off their list – ensuring the driveway and walkways are clear after a snowstorm, in-home support for a couple of hours each week helps the caregiver and the person receiving care. Additionally, respite care can help to alleviate some of the stressors and mental health toll of dedicated caregivers. Remembering to take care of others, we need to be able to take care of ourselves.

I am a Community Program Educator for the Alzheimer's Association. I am a volunteer and speak before groups just like you. I see in their faces the uncertainty of what the future will be like for their loved one and I see in their faces the goal of providing the best care for them. All of us have families and stories that resonant with my message. Respite care is necessary for our Maine caregivers, and I thank you for your support of L.D. 815.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today and to share my story.

Linda Whitten