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Making Minnesota Communities 'Dementia-Friendly'

MINNEAPOLIS (Jan. 7, 2014)—The scenes are repeated every day in communities throughout Minnesota. A customer seems lost in a store, not sure of what she came to purchase. A family wonders if an aging parent is simply having “senior moments” or is experiencing the memory loss of dementia. A Minnesotan is isolated in his lifelong community, falling behind on the everyday tasks of keeping a home. A business owner wants to help employees balance the demands of work and caring for aging family members, but faces the bottom-line effect of lost productivity from workday interruptions and absenteeism.

These are just a few of the realities of dementia in Minnesota’s aging population. In Minnesota, 100,000 people currently live with Alzheimer’s and related dementias. Nationally, one in nine people age 65 and older has the disease and by 2025, that number is estimated to increase 40 percent.

A new grant opportunity announced today by the collaborative ACT on Alzheimer’s® will provide seed money to help Minnesota communities prepare for and support the growing number of people with dementia and their caregivers. Seven communities throughout Minnesota already are in the early stages of becoming “dementia-friendly,” characterized by being informed, safe and respectful of anyone touched by dementia.

ACT on Alzheimer’s is a volunteer-driven, statewide collaboration. Its goal is to prepare Minnesota for the personal, social and budgetary impacts of Alzheimer’s disease. Working with communities to help them engage key partners and mobilize community sectors in becoming dementia-friendly is one of ACT’s key strategies. Resources and tools help guide communities in creating support systems for care partners and families and options for individuals with dementia to live independently with help from the community.

“As the population of Minnesota ages, it’s increasingly important to build support systems for people with dementia and Alzheimer’s,” said Olivia Mastry, executive lead of ACT on Alzheimer’s. “The best way to do that is at the community level with people who know it best.”

Grant recipients will work through the ACT on Alzheimer's comprehensive Community Toolkit to assess the support systems already in place and determine additional actions that will improve the lives of residents with dementia and support their caregivers.

"Helping those with dementia and their caregivers maintain their dignity and enjoy their lives is an important Minnesota value," said Mastry. "But there also are practical, economic issues. If we make it possible for people with dementia to live independently, we can keep them involved in our communities as volunteers, taxpayers and customers of Main Street businesses."

The seven communities currently acting on Alzheimer's are: Twin Cities Jewish Community, Walker, St. Paul Neighborhoods, St. Louis Park, Willmar, Cambridge and Forest Lake.

Among the highlights of the work already in progress are the following:

- A training session developed by the Twin Cities Jewish Community to teach area Rabbis signals to identify dementia and ways to help intervene and offer support to families.
- St. Paul Neighborhoods is adapting a European program to develop a community of dementia friends who can identify signs of dementia and know how to assist a person who appears to be struggling with everyday tasks, from shopping to traveling on a bus.
- St. Louis Park is taking advantage of existing programs in the city to raise awareness by including an Alzheimer's themed book for the citywide book club.

ACT on Alzheimer's is announcing new grants available of up to \$18,000. Organizations representing Minnesota communities defined by geography or shared interests are eligible. The grant offering is administered by the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging and funded through Blue Plus, a subsidiary of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, and the Medica Foundation. Applications will be accepted on or before March 4, 2014. Complete details and instructions are available at www.ACTonALZ.org

The community readiness initiative is just part of ACT on Alzheimer's strategy to prepare Minnesota for the future. The collaborative also is working to identify and invest in promising approaches to Alzheimer's care, promoting increased detection, raising awareness and helping to support and sustain caregivers.

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More than 60 organizations are partners in ACT on Alzheimer's®, dedicated to preparing Minnesota for the future and to creating supportive communities for individuals and families touched by Alzheimer's disease and dementia. More information is available at www.ACTonALZ.org