

TESTIMONY ON SB482
RELATING TO COGNITIVE ASSESSMENTS
HEARING: Friday, 02-10-25, 1:20PM
Conference Room 225 & Videoconference
State Capitol - 415 South Beretania Street

Chair San Buenaventura and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jerry Perone. I am a resident of Kaka‘ako and a dedicated advocate for the Alzheimer’s Association here in Hawai‘i. Before moving here, I worked with the Association in Washington, D.C., and today, as an Alzheimer’s Ambassador, I fight tirelessly—whenever and wherever I can—because this disease has devastated my life and the lives of those I love.

Alzheimer’s is not just a diagnosis. It is a slow and merciless thief, stealing memories, dignity, and, in the end, life itself. I know this all too well. I lost both my mother-in-law, Gladys, in 2018, and my dear friend of 50 years, Rich, just last year. Their journeys were heartbreaking—not just because of the disease, but because we saw the signs too late.

Gladys was the heart of our family—strong, independent, and full of warmth. After my father-in-law passed, she continued living on her own, resilient as ever. But then the small things started slipping. She would call us repeatedly, asking for directions to our home—a place she had visited countless times. She told us every night what she had eaten: salmon, green beans, half a grapefruit, and a salad. We thought she was just being consistent. We didn’t realize she could no longer remember anything else.

She had raised two daughters almost single-handedly. She had built a life of strength and independence. And then, piece by piece, that life was taken from her. She forgot how to cook anything other than that same meal. She got lost just a mile from home. And then, one day, she no longer recognized the people she had loved for a lifetime—including her husband of 60 years. We lost her long before she died.

Rich’s decline was just as cruel. A brilliant IBM engineer, everyone loved his infectious laugh. His mind had always been sharp—until, suddenly, it wasn’t. He started forgetting appointments. He lost track of conversations. Chess, his lifelong passion, became impossible. Then walking became difficult. Then he forgot how to use his phone. And then—most painfully—he forgot us.

We urged him to see a doctor, but by the time he was diagnosed, it was too late. His family did everything they could, caring for him at home as long as possible. Those of us who were his close friends helped where we could. But eventually, the disease progressed beyond what any

family could manage. He had to move to a care facility, where he spent his final months. Less than a year after his diagnosis, he was gone.

I live with the same question every day: What if we had known sooner? What if routine cognitive screenings had caught the signs earlier? What if we had been able to plan, explore treatments, and give them—and us—just a little more time? Instead, we were left scrambling, making impossible choices, watching helplessly as the people we loved faded away.

Alzheimer's does not just steal memories. It steals identity. It steals independence. It steals the ability to say goodbye while it still means something.

We cannot cure this disease—not yet. But early detection can change everything. It gives families time to prepare, to seek treatments that may slow the progression, to hold on to their loved ones for as long as possible.

Congress has the power to change the future for millions of families facing this cruel disease. We need policies that not only support research and resources but prioritize early detection—because with Alzheimer's, every moment matters.

Alzheimer's and other dementias primarily affect older adults, with 90% of cases occurring in those 65 and older. Here in Hawai'i, nearly one in five residents falls into this age group. That means our state is at increasing risk. Already, these diseases cost Hawai'i's Medicaid program \$285 million annually—a number that will only climb as our population ages.

By 2060, nearly 14 million Americans will have Alzheimer's. We cannot afford to wait. Standardized cognitive assessments during annual wellness visits are a critical step toward addressing this crisis. Early diagnosis leads to better care, better treatment options, and less strain on families and our healthcare system.

I urge this committee to take action. Support mandatory cognitive testing. Do it for our kūpuna. Do it for their caregivers. Do it for the future of our community.

Because the worst thing about Alzheimer's is realizing—too late—that time has already run out.

Thank you.