

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB700 HD1
TESTIMONY GIVEN BY GIRARD A. PERONE
RELATING TO COGNITIVE ASSESSMENTS

HEARING: Monday, March 10, 1:00 PM

Conference Room 225 & Videoconference

State Capitol - 415 South Beretania Street

Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair Aquino and Members of the Committee,

Senators, I stand before you today not just as an advocate, but as a husband, a friend, and a witness to the cruelest thief of all—Alzheimer’s.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is **Girard A. Perone**, though many know me as **Jerry**. 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. 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.

I have watched helplessly as **Alzheimer’s stole the light from the eyes of two people I loved—Gladys, my mother-in-law, and Rich, my dear friend of 50 years.** And now, I watch in horror as **Myrna, the wife of my best friend, slips away in the same cruel way.** But what frightens me most is what may come next—**my wife, Carol, living under the shadow of this disease, wondering if she is next.**

Alzheimer’s is a Thief: It Steals Lives, Piece by Piece

Gladys’ Story: A Life Stolen, Piece by Piece

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 with unwavering strength, navigating life’s challenges with resilience. 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.

Alzheimer's took her piece by piece. First, her memories. Then, her independence. Then, her identity. And long before her body passed, we had already said our goodbyes to the woman we knew and loved.

Rich's Story: A Brilliant Mind Fading Away

Rich's decline was just as cruel. A brilliant IBM engineer, he was known for his sharp intellect and infectious laugh. His mind had always been a source of pride—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. 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.**

Myrna's Story: A Husband's Unbearable Pain

And now, Myrna. Like Gladys and Rich, Myrna's journey follows the same tragic pattern—**one that could have been eased with earlier detection.** I don't know why her diagnosis came so late—why the warning signs were missed, dismissed, or ignored—but now it is her husband, John, who suffers every day, trying to care for the love of his life. **He watches helplessly as the vibrant woman he married disappears before his eyes.**

He cries when he tells me how helpless he feels, how exhausted he is, how he is **losing her piece by piece.** He never imagined this would be their future.

Carol's Fear: Living in the Shadow of Alzheimer's

But perhaps the most painful part of this disease is **the fear it leaves behind.**

My wife, Carol, carries that fear every day. She and her sister, Joyce, cared for their mother through every stage of her decline. Even after Gladys was placed in a memory care facility, Carol went **every day.** She saw the slow transformation—her mother's face became vacant, her voice became unrecognizable, and one day, she no longer knew who Carol was.

Now, at 73, **every forgotten word, misplaced item, or moment of confusion sends a chill down Carol's spine.**

If you have a parent, a spouse, a sibling—anyone over 65—**then you, too, live with this fear. Will you have to watch the people you love disappear before your eyes? Will you be left helpless, unable to save them?**

A Call to Action: Hawaii Must Lead

Hawai‘i has the opportunity to lead. By supporting policies that promote **early screening via cognitive testing, access to resources, and investments in Alzheimer’s research**, you can make a real difference for families like mine—families who are struggling, families who are afraid, and families who are desperate for hope.

Senators, you have the power to protect families like mine. Do not let another husband hold his wife’s hand, knowing that soon she will not remember his name. Do not let another son sit beside his mother, only to hear her ask, ‘Who are you?’ Support mandatory cognitive testing—because 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.**

Please take action, because the worst thing about Alzheimer’s is realizing—too late—that time has already run out and with Alzheimer’s every moment matters.

Mahalo for your time and consideration.