



# public health as a key partner

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Local and state public health agencies are important partners in the establishment of dementia-friendly community initiatives. The consideration of dementia as a public health issue is supported by its increasing occurrence, as well as the social, economic and health impact on families, caregivers and communities.

Public health agencies, local health care providers, and aging and disability resource centers can promote strong cross-sector participation in planning, implementing and evaluating community health efforts for dementia-friendly initiatives. These efforts will help ensure the promotion of health and well-being and actively engage individuals in decisions that affect health.

*Alzheimer's Disease burdens an increasing number of our nation's elders and their families, and it is essential that we confront the challenge it poses to our Public Health...*

— President Barack Obama

According to the 2012 World Health Organization's "*Dementia, a Public Health Priority*," improvements in health care in the past century have contributed to people living longer and healthier lives. The number of Americans surviving into their 80s, 90s and beyond is expected to grow dramatically, resulting in an increase in the number of people with non-communicable diseases, including dementia.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, there is a lack of awareness and understanding regarding dementia. Although Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are now viewed as chronic diseases, many individuals still perceive dementia as a mental illness or consider it a normal part of aging. Factors that increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias overlap with those of other chronic diseases, such as heart disease and stroke, diabetes and cancer. These modifiable risk factors include tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and alcohol misuse. Public health has played a key role in strategies to address these risk factors through partnership efforts.

The national Healthy Brain Initiative is a call to action. It is also a guide to the implementation of a coordinated approach to moving cognitive health into public health practice.<sup>4</sup> Collectively, the role of public health assures the health of a community by utilizing a cross-sector approach that encompasses the core functions of assessment, assurance and policy development.

Wisconsin's state health plan, *Healthiest Wisconsin 2020*, (HW2020) serves as the statewide agenda for improving health in the state. HW2020 includes chronic disease prevention and management as one of the 12 health focus areas. As Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are chronic diseases, their inclusion in state and local health plans should be priorities for the implementation of strategies and activities to improve the health of communities.

