Sen. Susan M. Collins
My Friend's Place
April 30, 2016

Thank you, Barbara. I am delighted to join you today in celebrating 15 years of care and compassion here at My Friend's Place. This remarkable program provides an invaluable service to those suffering from memory loss, to their families, and to our community.

Barbara deserves much praise for recognizing from her personal experience caring for her own parents who had dementia that there was a significant gap in services for people with Alzheimer's and other dementias and their families. She and Skippy Valentine are providing stimulation for those living with dementia as well as much-need respite care for their family caregivers.

It is a special pleasure to be here today with General Nelson Durgin. His commitment to our seniors is unmatched. In fact, I was delighted to name him as a delegate to the White House Conference on Aging a few years ago.

It is the expert staff, volunteers, charities, educational institutions, and supporters that make this much-needed program so successful. This would not be possible without the assistance of the Bangor First United Methodist Church. Friendship is one of life's greatest gifts, and you give with inspiring generosity.

The importance of My Friend's Place was made crystal clear on one of my many trips around the State. I saw an 88-year-old woman taking care of her 90-year-old husband with Alzheimer's. I spoke with a woman in her 50's who is juggling the care of her mother, stricken with the disease, with her work schedule. I talked to an elderly husband trying to cope with his own health problems as well as his wife's dementia.

As families throughout the country can attest, Alzheimer's is a devastating disease that exacts a tremendous personal and economic toll on individuals, families, and our health care system. The Centers for Disease Control lists Alzheimer's as the sixth leading cause of death in our country.

Approximately 5.4 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's today, including 37,000 in the state of Maine. That number is soaring as our overall population grows older and lives longer. If current trends continue, Alzheimer's disease could affect as many as 16 million Americans by the year 2050.

In addition to the human suffering it causes, Alzheimer's is our nation's costliest disease. The United States spends more than $236 billion per year, including $160 billion in costs to the Medicare and Medicaid programs caring for people with Alzheimer's. It is the only one of our nation's top ten diseases without an effective means of prevention, treatment, or a cure, and the only one of the major chronic diseases -- such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, heart disease, and diabetes -- with an annual death rate that continues to escalate. If we do nothing, the Alzheimer's

Association forecasts that the disease will cost the United States an astonishing $1.1 trillion by 2050.

Despite these alarming statistics, for too long our efforts to fight this devastating disease lacked coordination and focus. It was not until the bipartisan National Alzheimer's Project Act I co-authored became law in 2011 that a strategic national plan to combat Alzheimer's was created, and it has since been updated annually. NAPA focuses our efforts to accelerate progress toward better treatments, a means of prevention, and ultimately, a cure. It provides a roadmap to a better future by setting the primary goal of preventing and effectively treating the disease by 2025. That legislation created an expert council, whose chairman has testified that $2 billion per year is needed to achieve that goal.

On the Appropriations Committee, I worked to turn the words of that recommendation into action. The spending bill passed last year includes a $2 billion overall increase for the National Institutes of Health, the largest increase since 2004. That includes a $350 million increase for Alzheimer's research, the largest in history, bringing the total to $936 million – a more than 50 percent increase and almost half-way to our $2 billion goal.

As Chairman of the Senate Aging Committee, I chaired a hearing early this month to assess the progress we are making toward the goal of ending Alzheimer's by 2025. Our panel of expert witnesses described many encouraging steps we have taken in the past five years to advance both research and support for patients and caregivers.

In addition to an update on the status of research, the Committee heard compelling testimony from caregivers. Among them was the noted actor, David Hyde Pierce from the television show "Frasier," who has experienced the heartbreak of Alzheimer's in his own family. Mr. Pierce has been an effective advocate for Alzheimer's care for nearly two decades and has served on the advisory council created by NAPA. He said that while the research community is moving forward, similar progress is lacking in our efforts to enhance the quality of care and support for Alzheimer's patients and their families.

We also heard from Polly Bradley, who is Director of Adult Services at the Southern Maine Agency on Aging. She described to the Committee the vital importance of the adult day services for both dementia patients and their families. Like the two centers operated by her agency, My Friend's Place offers a welcoming, person-centered approach that encourages social interaction and activity that helps maintain physical and emotional health as well as cognitive function. These programs also support the overall physical health and emotional wellbeing of family caregivers by giving them a much-needed respite from the 24/7 care of their loved ones with Alzheimer's.

To address this gap, I have introduced bipartisan legislation that would develop a national strategy to recognize and support caregivers. The RAISE Family Caregivers Act directs the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a National Family Caregiving Project to develop and sustain a national strategy. There are more than 40 million individuals in our nation who know all too well the compassion, commitment, and endurance that it takes to be a caregiver of a loved one facing a chronic disease like Alzheimer's. Our caregivers devote their time and attention, and they frequently must make many personal and financial sacrifices to ensure that their loved ones have the care they need day in and day out. The RAISE Family Caregivers Act has passed unanimously in the Senate last December and now awaits action in the House.

We are in a race against time. With baby boomers turning 65 at a rate of 10,000 persons per day, it is estimated that nearly one in two baby boomers reaching 85 will develop Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's may become the defining disease of this generation.

Working together, we can write a new definition, of a challenge met, of hope rather than despair. I look forward to joining you in building a new future, in creating a world where Alzheimer's can be treated or cured or, best of all, prevented. All the while, My Friend's Place will be lending a helping hand to our families, and for that, I am so grateful.