

Initiative Aims to Build Community Network for Dementia Support Across Utah

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Project organizers Heather Kelley, Ph.D., Beth Fauth, Ph.D., and Ty Aller, Ph.D.

A new statewide effort is underway to better support Utahns living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, along with community members, professionals, and the family members who care for them. The Dementia Resource Ambassador program, led by the Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia Research Center (ADRC) and the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) at Utah State University, is being launched in collaboration with the Utah chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and the Utah Department of Health and Human Services.

Today, ten percent of Utahns aged 65 years or older have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, and an estimated 112,000 Utahns provide informal care for a loved one with dementia at home. Many do so without training, guidance, or support. This can lead to high levels of stress and burnout and sometimes the use of outdated or ineffective care practices.

The new initiative aims to change that by training community members throughout Utah on available dementia resources and how to access or refer others to high-quality local support. Those who complete the new program will become Dementia Resource Ambassadors, serving as trusted connectors in their communities and to our state's existing resource network.

"This training series is unique. While most public trainings focus on education about dementia, this series does

that, but it also trains people about services available at state and local levels, and how to direct people in their communities to appropriate services," said Beth Fauth, Ph.D., director of the state funded, USU-based Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia Research Center and principal investigator of the Ambassador program.

The three-year, community-based training program will offer information and training in three parts. First, beginning in October, project coordinators began hosting webinars each month on topics such as understanding dementia, the importance of early diagnosis, planning for care, managing caregiver stress, and dementia treatment options. The webinars also address common myths, such as the belief that dementia is just a normal part of aging or that a diagnosis isn't helpful. Sessions are open to interested community members throughout Utah—caregivers, individuals with dementia, healthcare providers, volunteers, faith leaders, and others.

Next, beginning in 2026, organizers will create several Dementia Resource Ambassador training cohorts, each with approximately 10 to 15 members drawn from participants who expressed interest while attending one or more of the webinar sessions. These cohorts will meet monthly in web meetings for six months to receive in-depth training on dementia, available resources, and referral skills. Participants will include people with lived experience, such as caregivers or individuals in the early stages of dementia, as well as professionals or community leaders who interact with older adults.

Individuals who complete this training will serve as Dementia Resource Ambassadors, offering guidance and resource referrals in their local communities, including rural areas where support is often more difficult to access. Ambassadors then stay connected to the network after the program is over, informed about new state and local resources as they arise.

Finally, in an effort to reach even more Utahns, by the end of 2027, project coordinators will create an asynchronous online class that includes the core training materials provided to the cohort participants. This cost-effective course will allow anyone in the state to learn at their own pace about the dementia resources available to the public. The course will be interactive and self-guided with video clips, case scenarios, short informational texts to read, and review quizzes to complete.

Project coordinator Heather Kelley, Ph.D., researcher for the IDRPP, emphasized the importance of bringing accurate information and meaningful support closer to

where people live. “A lot of individuals with dementia and caregivers aren’t getting adequate support,” she said. “We actually have a lot of really good resources, but it’s always a challenge disseminating those resources to the people who need them most, particularly in rural areas.”

Kelley explained that the Dementia Resource Ambassadors will fill a crucial gap in the state. “The goal is to train individuals who are integrated into communities so that when people in their community come to them for help, they are able to refer them to the right resources.”

Just as important, Kelley said, is the sense of connection the program hopes to build. “In addition to just getting resources to people, it is about the strength of community connection and the validation of meeting someone who has lived through a similar thing that you are living through. We also hope it can play a bi-directional role where ambassadors not only disseminate resources to the community but also reach out to us if they identify gaps in the available resources.”

The organizers hope the initiative will create a sustainable, statewide network of knowledgeable, compassionate Dementia Resource Ambassadors who can guide Utah families toward the help they need—when and where they need it.