

Testimony On HF 3575 / SF 3461 Healthy Aging and Dementia Education

My name is Manka Nkimbeng, and I am a nurse researcher who has worked with older adults for over 15 years. I am an African immigrant, and we love stories...So let me tell you a story...

Mr. and Mrs. Smith are U.S. citizens now, but they migrated to join their son and his family. Their son, his wife, and their two kids, an 8-year-old daughter, and a 14-year-old son live in Minneapolis. The Smiths like many other African immigrants live in a multi-generational home and help support their children with house chores and caring for their grandkids. The Smith's son and his wife are both in school now while working full-time jobs in IT. Mrs. Smith is the one who cooks and watches over the kids after school. It has been several months since Mr. Smith noticed that his wife has been acting strangely, but he has been supporting her, answering her numerous questions, helping her with phone calls and other activities of daily living (e.g. managing finances).

Mrs. Smith's grandchildren have also noticed that she keeps asking them the same questions and she will walk into the bathroom and forget what she had to do there. Furthermore, Mrs. Smith fell a couple of times with no injuries. Recently, she got her husband very worried when she took much longer on one of her walks... it appeared she was lost when he went looking for her at the nearby park. He now goes with her for every walk.

Mrs. Smith is exhibiting signs of cognitive impairment, but sadly like many African immigrants, she and her husband had never heard of dementia before, and this family doesn't know the signs of cognitive impairment/memory loss and dementia. Mrs. Smith's son and his wife haven't noticed because of their busy schedules while the grandchildren know something is wrong but can't fully grasp what is happening. Mr. Smith who knows exactly what is happening is afraid to tell anyone because where he comes from, anyone showing these symptoms could be considered crazy or bewitched. He doesn't want his wife of 50 years to be labeled a witch. So, Mr. Smith didn't tell their son and the kids didn't say anything either. Even worse, they did not tell her primary care provider so there was no cognitive screening at her annual physical exam. It wasn't until a year later after being admitted to the hospital for a serious fall that she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Dementia education is greatly needed in the African immigrant community, as well as many other communities. Over the past five years, I have been working with community partners to understand the dementia care experiences of African immigrants and offer community dementia education. We do not know the burden of dementia in African immigrants, but we know that Black persons in the U.S. have a greater risk of dementia. Furthermore, Black persons and other racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. often receive late diagnoses, late treatment, and have limited access to formal/paid services and supports (e.g. home care services and daycare), in addition to other cultural challenges such as language barriers. In dementia care and treatment as the African proverb goes, it takes a village to support someone living with dementia. The African immigrant community is a collectivist culture and takes care of its own and we recently found in our study that though limited, there are some community-developed resources to support families living with and supporting someone with dementia.

What if Mrs. Smith's grandchildren knew the signs and symptoms of dementia? What if they brought it up with their parents and grandparents? The Smith's story is a composite story, but it is based on my experiences working with the community.

We don't have a cure yet, but we know that timely diagnosis and access to care plays a significant role in the quality of life for all involved. Educating high school students about healthy aging, dementia signs, and symptoms can play a key role in recognizing the symptoms in family members. Indeed, it will enable high school students to help with older adults' health... part of African cultural values where members of the community support each other. This bill has the potential to improve timely access to dementia diagnosis and potential treatments not only for African immigrants but for all.