

Hit hardest by Alzheimer's

February 16, 2014

By STEPHANIE MONROE

Stephanie Monroe is the director of the African American Network Against Alzheimer's

While we await President Obama's proposed national budget, it's time to consider the hundreds of billions of dollars expended in support of the millions of Americans struggling to make it through each day with Alzheimer's. Despite cries from researchers and caregivers, increased funding for Alzheimer's to help reduce those costs has been a minimal part of the debate.

This lack of urgency leaves taxpayers on the hook for rising medical bills. But those who are hit hardest by Alzheimer's might surprise you.

A report by researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that African Americans bear more than one-third of the nation's costs of Alzheimer's and dementia care, although they make up less than 14 percent of the population. In 2012 alone, the costs of care for African Americans suffering from Alzheimer's were nearly \$71.6 billion, out of total national costs of \$210 billion. This cost disparity is a result of the fact that African Americans are two to three times more likely than non-Hispanic white Americans to develop Alzheimer's - the nation's sixth-leading cause of death, but the fourth-leading cause for older African Americans.

Sadly, nearly 61 percent of the cost comes from informal caregiving, which places undue pressure on families and the economy as more people are forced to choose between a job and family. Though Medicare pays for 59 percent of

the medical costs associated with the disease, and Medicaid covers 54 percent of nursing-home, adult day-care, and assisted-living expenses, African American families still pay out of pocket more than \$3.45 billion toward care. These financial and emotional burdens placed on family members - many of whom care for both their children and elderly parents - are enormous.

Despite this, Congress has in recent years instituted drastic, across-the-board cuts to the National Institutes of Health, which provides the bulk of Alzheimer's research funding in the United States.

Congress and the Obama administration made inroads to fill the hole left by those cuts in the recently passed 2014 budget, but those increases for Alzheimer's research are not commensurate with the size, scope, and economic damage of the Alzheimer's epidemic, especially given the lack of attention paid to the disparate impact of this disease.

We need a cohesive national long-term care strategy before generations of economic and social progress are lost. As part of that endeavor, Congress must increase annual research funding for the disease from \$500 million - the equivalent of about \$95 per person living with the disease - to at least \$2 billion.

Cures are cheaper than care, which is why the administration and Congress must continue to advance Alzheimer's research with increased funding. The choice is clear: Invest now or pay later.