RECOMMENDATION: Caregiving is a pressing issue that will virtually affect all of us as the need for long-term services and supports increases due to the growing population of frail older Alaskans. Families and informal caregivers are the backbone of Alaska’s long-term support system. They provide 80% of the in-home care for seniors and comprise a rapidly growing component of our health care system. While family caregiving is rewarding, it is also very challenging and places caregivers at risk for poor health and financial hardship. The Family Caregiver Support Program provides training, respite, care coordination, and other supports to assist families in the care of their elderly loved ones at home and grandparents raising at-risk grandchildren. These services help to keep caregivers strong and delay the need for costly institutional care. Senior and Disabilities Services reports 21 caregivers on a statewide waitlist for services based on provider feedback (December 2014). Additional base funding is recommended to address the waitlist for services, build program capacity to serve more family caregivers of seniors with dementia, and provide specialized training for families who are being called upon to provide nursing tasks at home.

WHY DO WE NEED FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT SERVICES? Family caregivers are the heart and soul of Alaska’s long-term support services for older Alaskans living at home needing assistance due to Alzheimer’s disease and related dementia, physical disabilities, and chronic health conditions. They are critical to keeping loved ones living safely at home. When family caregivers receive appropriate supports and training, research shows they are able to provide care at home one year or longer, thus postponing the need for higher cost institutional care. Family caregiver support services provide preventative care to maintain the health and wellbeing of caregivers. Many caregivers seek assistance when they are in crisis and need immediate respite and other supports to avoid exhaustion and possible harm to their elderly loved ones under their care. Without family caregivers, paid in-home services or nursing home care may be the only alternatives shifting substantial cost and burden to the state.

WHO ARE FAMILY CAREGIVERS?

- Adult children caring for an elderly parent, spouses caring for their spouse, and other relatives or friends caring for elderly loved ones. Approximately, 33,000 Alaskans provided 37 million hours of unpaid care to their adult family members in 2013. They provide assistance with feeding, dressing, bathing, and managing incontinence in addition to shopping, preparing meals, household chores, and nursing tasks. Caregiving has dramatically expanded in recent years and now include a broad array of nursing tasks such as giving injections, providing wound care, preparing special diets, and managing prescriptions. The majority of family caregivers receive little or no training to perform these tasks.
- Grandparents caring for grandchildren with parents who are not present in the household due to substance misuse, incarceration, health reasons, and other challenges. In Alaska, there are an estimated 7,089 grandparents who report they are responsible for the care of grandchildren living with them (American Community Survey, 2009-2013). Almost 12% of
Ensuring the dignity and independence of all older Alaskans and assisting them through planning, advocacy, education, and interagency cooperation to lead useful and meaningful lives.