Advancing Equity in Cancer Care in the United States

Overview

While there have been major advancements in cancer treatment, more needs to be done to ensure that all people living with cancer receive the care and supportive services they need. Cancer affects all population groups across the United States; however, due to complex and interrelated social and economic factors – known as the social drivers or determinants of health – some groups bear a disproportionate burden of cancer, from prevalence to mortality.[1,2] For example, people from racial and ethnic minority groups, those who have a low income, poor health literacy, live in rural areas, or lack health insurance, often face greater barriers to care.[3] These factors, coupled with fragmented and poorly coordinated cancer care, can lead to worse health outcomes.[4]

Alliance for Equity in Cancer Care

The **Alliance for Equity in Cancer Care** ("Alliance") is a national, multi-site initiative that aims to advance health equity by improving timely access to **high-quality, culturally responsive cancer care for people from underserved U.S. communities**. The Merck Foundation is funding the Alliance with a $20 million, five-year (2022-2026) commitment.

As a collective, the Alliance's program partners are implementing evidence-informed, innovative solutions to tackle some of the most pressing challenges that people living with cancer face. They are also developing tools and resources to help cancer facilities deliver care more equitably and efficiently.

The Alliance aims to:

Improve coordination of care from diagnosis through survivorship	**Strengthen patient provider communication** and patient engagement in treatment decisions	**Build community partnerships** that address barriers to cancer care related to the social drivers of health and provide psychosocial support services	**Disseminate findings and program results** to improve the delivery of equitable cancer care

Implementing evidence-informed, innovative solutions

Programs partners at a glance

1. Conquer Cancer®, the ASCO Foundation (Montana): ASCO is using a hub-and-spoke model to train local health teams on delivering cancer care in rural settings so that cancer treatment and support services can be provided closer to home.

2. Boston Medical Center (Boston, MA): Using the Oncology Equity Alliance's screening tool, THRIVE, the team is identifying the social and psychological needs of people living with cancer from historically marginalized communities to improve access to supportive services.

3. Case Comprehensive Cancer Center, Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland, OH): Through its network of community partners, Case is deploying a scalable model, involving patient navigation, support services and education, to overcome systemic barriers to care and improve the equitable delivery of cancer care.

4. Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center (Baton Rouge, LA): Mary Bird's community partners are providing navigation services following assessments of patients' physical, emotional and psychological needs. The Center is also delivering training to strengthen patient-provider communication and address unconscious bias in patient care.

5. Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) Cancer Center (New York, NY): By engaging community-based organizations, government agencies, health care systems and other partners, MSK is expanding its Integrated Cancer Care Access Network to increase access to telehealth and psychosocial support services.

6. RWJBarnabas Health and Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey (New Brunswick, NJ): Through its Oncology Access Center, RWJBarnabas is expanding patient navigation services by training clinicians in patient-centered communication and equipping health teams with technology that streamlines referrals to specialists and oncology support services.

7. University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center (Lexington, KY): Markey is enhancing coordination of cancer care with digital tools that facilitate psychosocial screening, patient navigation, remote patient monitoring, and patient and provider education.

8. National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN): NCCN is piloting the Health Equity Report Card – a new tool to help cancer facilities deliver care more equitably – in community-based cancer care settings. The plan is to adapt the tool for wider use across the United States.

The Alliance is led by the **Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center,** in partnership with the VCU Center on Health Disparities. As the National Program Office, VCU serves as the coordinating hub for program partners, fostering communication and peer-to-peer learning, conducting a cross-site evaluation and sharing program results.

Alliance for Equity in Cancer Care
an initiative funded by Merck Foundation

Select Alliance accomplishments

Since the Alliance began in 2022, the National Program Office at VCU has reported strong progress in improving care for people living with cancer.

Improving coordination of care

More than 30 cancer navigators are coordinating care for over 600 people living with cancer. Many sites have implemented screening for social drivers of health and are connecting patients with the support services they need. So far, almost 200 people living with cancer have been referred for psychosocial, housing, food, educational, financial and legal services.

Supporting healthcare providers

The Alliance is providing care team members with high-quality professional development and training so they can deliver compassionate, culturally sensitive patient-centered care. More than 200 clinical and non-clinical staff have been trained in implicit bias, cultural sensitivity and protocols to guide effective communication with patients.

Building community partnerships

Alliance program partners are also establishing new relationships and expanding existing ones with local, community-based organizations to facilitate access to high-quality cancer care. Through active engagement with community collaborators, Alliance partners are benefiting from bi-directional knowledge sharing and identifying solutions to address barriers to cancer care. More than 150 new community partnerships are now in place to help ensure that people living with cancer take full advantage of patient navigation services.

Changing hospital policies

The Alliance is working to drive health system change in the delivery of cancer care for long-term, sustainable impact. To date, program partners have implemented 17 policies to improve access to high-quality cancer care and reduce disparities. For example, one site now requires that all admitted patients are screened for needs related to social drivers of health. Another site established a new approach to manage workflow in the emergency department (ED) to improve provider communication and collaboration when a patient's test results require further follow-up – a practice that can reduce the number of return ED visits.

Working to drive health system change in the delivery of cancer care for long-term, sustainable impact

Looking ahead

Building on these achievements, Alliance program partners are committed to increasing the capacity of their organizations to provide cancer navigation services and generating data on the health impact of patient navigation. They are developing new community partnerships while strengthening existing ones to respond to patients' evolving needs. And they will continue to drive policy change within their hospitals, health systems and more broadly. The Alliance is on a promising path to create a more equitable system for caring for people living with cancer – so that regardless of where people live, their socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, they can access the high-quality cancer care that they need.

> The Alliance is on a promising path to create a more equitable system for caring for people living with cancer.

To learn more about the Alliance, please visit equityincancercare.org.

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