

spotlight

Providence Cancer Center Anchorage, Alaska



When your catchment area is twice the size of Texas, parts of your community are only accessible by boat or plane, and cancer patients sometimes delay treatment to go subsistence hunting, it takes a special group of professionals to form a cancer program able to adapt to extraordinary barriers to care. Providence Cancer Center in Anchorage, Alaska, is up to that task.

Located on the grounds of the Providence Health & Services campus in Anchorage, Providence Cancer Center is an outpatient clinic that occupies a three-story tower. The program offers state-of-the-art medical, radiation, and surgical oncology services, as well as a wide variety of supportive services. Most of the imaging services are performed at the main hospital connected to the main hospital campus by a walkway. The cancer center is staffed by 98 employees and has the state's only pediatric infusion and oncology centers, with subspecialists available for the treatment of pediatric patients.

Overcoming Barriers

Providence Cancer Center faces unique barriers to the delivery of cancer care. The northernmost tip of Alaska, Utqiagvik, is a two-hour plane ride away, as is the southernmost tip of the Alaska Panhandle. As a tertiary care provider, Providence Cancer Center is referred patients from the small critical access hospitals and clinics in these remote communities. Treatment and travel is often coordinated well in advance, in case patients' homes are inaccessible during flooding season or they must go hunting or

whaling for sustenance. Social workers who work at the cancer center are required to complete 6 hours of Alaska Native-specific cultural education every 2 years.

With these additional logistical concerns, patient navigation plays an even more crucial role in treatment than in most cancer programs and is available for all disease sites. Says Bethany Zimpelman, CPON, MSN, a pediatric oncology and infusion nurse, "I never imagined in nursing school that I would be spending time on the phone arranging Medicaid plane travel, or how patients would be getting on their boat from their island." Navigators are available to assist any person diagnosed with cancer—regardless of where they receive treatment.

One unique resource the cancer center provides patients coming from disparate locations is the Hickel House, a guest hotel funded by a family donation. Providence Cancer Center maintains the building, and though patients pay when they can, it is still available for patients and their family members if they cannot. Says Ella Goss, MSN, RN, director of the center, "At Providence we care for the poor and vulnerable no matter what, and our values are built around justice, stewardship, excellence, and compassion."

Providence Cancer Center has a strong partnership with the American Cancer Society, which provides resources to patients with barriers to access. A dedicated American Cancer Society navigator is colocated with the Providence Cancer Center navigators and partners with the cancer center team to coordinate funding for flights

and lodging, as well as referrals to Providence navigators for medical emergencies, psychosocial needs, and family dynamics support.

"We have such a huge geographic area to get patients in," says Betsy Baldwin, MSHA, manager of radiation oncology, "and, in general, the navigation department coordinates it very well."

Comprehensive Multidisciplinary Care

Providence Cancer Center's separation from the contiguous United States does not affect its quality of care. In fact, the cancer center has the same technology and works at the same capacity as some of the most prestigious academic programs in the lower 48. Prior to the hospital's relocation of the cancer center into a tower in 2008, the cancer center's infusion center was significantly smaller, and patients would often have to be sent to Washington for treatment. Now, the center has a 12-bed infusion center for adults and a seven-bed infusion center for pediatric patients, and patients rarely have to go outside the state.

The approach to care at Providence Cancer Center is multidisciplinary. All cancer patients are seen by a team including, as needed, medical oncology, radiation oncology, and surgical oncology. Radiation oncology reviews the treatment plans for every patient, and the gynecologic oncology group meets every week to review all patients under service as well. Pediatrics conducts interdisciplinary rounds once a week to review all of its patients, with a separate tumor board that includes other

disciplines. When necessary, genetic counseling is available over the phone for patients who must travel a significant distance to the cancer center. The cancer center also provides social work, child life therapy, and hospital-based schooling as needed.

The radiation oncology department offers comprehensive radiation therapy services, including TomoTherapy, CyberKnife, and TruBeam; the medical director of the program actively seeks out new technologies that provide the most benefit to the center's patients.

Providence Cancer Center has a number of accreditations that serve as proof of its high level of care. Through Providence Health & Services, the cancer program is accredited by The Joint Commission and the American College of Radiology. Providence Cancer Center is currently in the process of achieving American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer accreditation as well.

The program provides a robust clinical trials program, with a total of 97 oncology trials running and 34 adult trials currently open to enrollment. Most trials are sponsored by the National Cancer Institute. Pediatric oncology also has 18 open clinical trials through the Children's Oncology Group; prior to their partnership with the Children's Oncology Group, pediatric patients had to travel out of state to participate in clinical trials.

In addition to its clinical services, Providence Cancer Center offers a vast array of supportive care services, including the following:


- A dedicated chaplain
- A support center for the children of cancer patients
- A dietitian who provides cookbooks and consultations to anyone in need
- A resource center in the lobby with a library of oncology education materials on the center's services.

An oncology rehabilitation team located within the cancer center hosts group training programs and also works one on one with patients, in addition to providing treatment for lymphedema. The rehab team also partners with the hospital's outpatient speech therapy department on swallow

safety screens for head-and-neck cancer patients.

Beyond Patient-Centered Care

The resources in the Women's Boutique are emblematic of the patient-centered approach that Providence Cancer Center takes in its care. When there were not adequate resources available in Anchorage to meet the needs of women with cancer, the cancer center decided to create its own. The boutique is stocked with complimentary items intended to ease the side effects of breast cancer treatment, including drainage belts, postsurgical camisoles, comfort pillows, prostheses, lymphedema garments, and seat belt loops. The entire navigation team has training in wig-fitting, and a breast cancer navigator works specifically with breast cancer patients. The boutique is staffed by volunteers, and cancer-related products are provided through grants from the American Cancer Society and the Providence Foundation without concern for the patient's financial need. Says Sara Cockerham, LCSW, OSW-C, manager of cancer resources and patient navigation, "The purpose of the space itself is to respect the dignity of the individual who has a need and provide the type of one-on-one care and support that can bring about significant emotional connection between our patients and staff."

"We're proud to provide amazing care to patients," says Goss. "We do it with excellence and cutting-edge technology, and we have fantastic people who choose to be caregivers in our community." 



Select Support Services

- Spiritual care
- Genetic counseling
- Nutrition services
- Women's boutique
- Patient navigation

Number of new analytic cases seen in 2017: 1100 (41 pediatric cases)