

spotlight

Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care, MaineGeneral Medical Center Augusta, Maine



The Kennebec Valley is one of the largest north-to-south regions of Maine, covering more than 5,000 square miles along the Kennebec River, and is home to over 12 percent of the state's cancer patients. MaineGeneral Medical Center's Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care opened in 2007 and is located in Augusta, Maine. Previously, the cancer center was co-located at two sites in two different hospitals. Now, the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care sits on MaineGeneral Medical Center's campus and provides oncology services through its standalone suite, which includes 24 infusion chairs and four procedure rooms and its "Open Access Clinic," a symptom management clinic that allows patients to come in as needed for care. Staffed by an advance practice nurse and an oncology certified nurse, the Open Access Clinic takes a proactive approach to meeting the emergent needs of cancer patients; for example, to treat nausea, vomiting, and pain and to

receive IV fluids. Rather than heading to the emergency department, patients and/or caregivers can call and describe their symptoms to a triage nurse, who helps determine whether the patient should come into the clinic. Since its inception, the Open Access Clinic's services have helped decrease oncology patients' emergency department visits and hospitalization rates. To accommodate growing patient volumes, plans are to add a six-chair open area to the Open Access Clinic.

The cancer center staff includes 2 radiation oncologists, 5 medical oncologists, 6 advance practice providers, 24 oncology certified nurses, 5 point-of-entry nurse navigators, 8 clinical navigators, and 2 on-site financial counselors.

Accredited by the Commission on Cancer and the American College of Radiology, in 2010, the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care was the first cancer program in Maine to also receive the American Society of Clinical

Oncology's Quality Oncology Practice Initiative certification. The cancer program is committed to providing a high standard of quality care.

"On almost every indicator that the CoC [Commission on Cancer] has for rapid reporting on quality improvement, we're exceeding in the state," said Barbara Wiggin, MBA, CNMT, CBDT, manager of radiation oncology. As standards continue to evolve, the cancer program is striving to ensure that every staff

member is engaged in meeting or even exceeding those standards.

The Kennebec Valley is home to a largely rural patient population. "We are always battling transportation issues," Wiggin said. "Patients can't do well if their basic needs aren't met." In response, the cancer center has created extensive resources tailored to its patient population—including support for transportation, groceries, survivorship, community education, and screening initiatives for preventative care—so that patients can receive treatment close to home.

A Focus on Community

According to the American Lung Association (ALA) 2019 "State of Lung Cancer" report, Maine's rate of newly diagnosed lung cancer cases ranks above the national rate. The state's high lung cancer rate has been attributed to tobacco use—a greater percentage of adults in Maine are current smokers (19.5 percent vs. 16.8 percent nationally, according to the ALA report)—and radon levels across the state. To combat this issue, the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care works diligently on smoking cessation and radon mitigation. The cancer center also plans to expand its lung screening program to educate its community and identify more respiratory cancers at stage I.

Proactive steps already underway include a lung cancer lunch and learn developed by cancer program staff to strengthen relationships between primary care offices in the area and the cancer center. For this program, a nurse navigator and lung specialist travel to providers' offices to discuss their screening



processes and resources. Through programs such as this, the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care is seeking collaborative approaches to bring resources and providers together so that patients can receive high-quality, coordinated care in their home communities. Started in 2016, these provider outreach efforts continue to be a priority due to an increase in new providers in the area. Currently, the cancer center performs about 1,000 lung cancer screenings per year, but an ongoing challenge is ensuring that those patients who were identified as requiring annual screenings continue to follow up. Respiratory-related cancers totaled to 22.3 percent of the cancer cases in 2018, followed by cancers of the digestive system (15 percent) and breast (13.8 percent).

Point-of-Entry Navigation

When patients are diagnosed, they are assigned a point-of-entry nurse navigator based on the patient's cancer site and the nurse's specialty. Nurse navigators work with patients and their primary care providers to facilitate testing and referrals to oncology specialists. These point-of-entry navigators help patients with the leading cancer sites—breast, lung, head and neck, genitourinary, gastrointestinal, and gynecologic. This model of navigation is unique because point-of-entry navigators do not stay with patients throughout their entire cancer care journey. Once patients begin treatment, they receive a warm hand-off to clinical navigators, who continue to work with the patients and their families until the end of the patient's cancer care. Nurse navigators at the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care work collaboratively with specialty and primary care offices and the patient.

Point-of-entry nurse navigators play an important role in facilitating patient care as close to home as appropriate. They also provide distress screening to all new patients to identify and address any concerns, linking patients with resources to address travel issues, financial distress, and psychosocial needs and resources, which are available to patients at any time along the care continuum. Patients who express financial concern are directed to a financial counselor. Three on-site oncology social workers are available to provide patients with psychosocial

support at any point during the treatment process.

Technology Driven

The team at the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care is proud to offer patients treatment with the most up-to-date technology. Recent investments by the cancer center include acquisition of two new TrueBeam linear accelerators and replacement of the computed tomography simulator and positron emission tomography-computed tomography scanner. The cancer center offers a variety of radiation therapy treatment modalities, including SRS, SBRT, HDR, IGRT, IMRT, and Varian Real-Time Position Management.

The Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care leverages technology to facilitate twice-weekly multidisciplinary tumor boards. The cancer program employs a software program that helps organize and streamline each meeting. Specialists can use this software to schedule dates when they want to present and to ensure that the appropriate providers will be participating. Providers can participate via Skype if they are unable to attend in person.

Developing Partnerships

As the cancer center's resources expand, so do its formal partnerships. Patients have access to clinical trials at both the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care and Maine Medical Center in Portland, Maine. The cancer center is also home to the Maine Cancer Genomics Initiative, which is supported by The Harold Alfond Foundation. The Maine Cancer Genomics Initiative is a special alliance of cancer experts, clinicians, and researchers from The Jackson Laboratory who are focused on improving outcomes for cancer patients across Maine. Test results are discussed monthly at statewide genomic tumor boards. More than 500 Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care patients have been helped through this partnership.

The cancer center is also a member of the MaineHealth Cancer Care Network, which is supported by The Harold Alfond Foundation. The goal of the network is to reduce travel for patients whenever possible. Almost 300



providers across the New England area connect to discuss diagnosis and treatment options for their patients, reducing the travel burden for patients and caregivers. The network also offers navigation, social work, and nutritional support for patients. Through this partnership, the Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care can facilitate care and resources for patients by connecting with other partnered locations across the state.

For rural communities in the Kennebec Valley, the cancer center's commitment to high-quality, patient-centered care is the foundation for services that enable patients to receive care surrounded by their greatest supporters—family and friends. In care delivery, patient concerns and shared decision making are prioritized, and education and screening initiatives serve the entire community. 