

# spotlight

## Spencer Cancer Center, East Alabama Medical Center Opelika, Alabama



**S**pencer Cancer Center provides its scattered rural population in east central Alabama a suite of services that match those of comprehensive cancer centers in large urban areas. Located on the main campus of East Alabama Medical Center, the stand-alone facility opened in June 2019. A recognized provider of high-quality holistic cancer care, Spencer Cancer Center is accredited by the Commission on Cancer as a comprehensive community cancer program and by the American College of Radiology for positron emission tomography (PET)/computed tomography.

Before opening the new facility, East Alabama Medical Center offered medical, radiation, and surgical oncology and hematology services within its main hospital. When first planning to house cancer services separate from the hospital, leadership developed a plan that would allow the oncology program to grow along with the community. In every decision the medical center made—from the number of infusion chairs to the treatment and technology it would offer—Spencer Cancer Center was built for the future. “With the foresight involved in designing a cancer center of this size and space and bringing the technology that we have, we’ve got the latest and greatest,” explains Matt Sherer, MBA, MSHA, executive director at Spencer Cancer Center. “There’s not another cancer center within a six-hour driving radius that we couldn’t compete with.” The new, modern facility also received an award from the Alabama Council of The American Institute of Architects in 2019 after it was voted the best institutional building in

Alabama the same year. The 59,596-square-foot, two-story building combines natural and man-made materials evoking language of the surrounding environmental landscape. Exterior material selections represent the advancement of cancer care over time, with stone representing earlier years. As the building grows upward, aluminum panels and glass represent the modern technology used in contemporary medicine.

### Staffing a World-Class Facility

Spencer Cancer Center’s medical and radiation oncology providers are employed by East Alabama Medical Center, and its surgical oncology services are provided by a private practice housed within the hospital. Its radiation oncology department is staffed by two radiation oncologists, six radiation therapists, two radiation oncology nurses, two dosimetrists, a physicist, two registration representatives, and two PET/computed tomography technicians, one of whom is PET nationally certified. Housed on the first floor of the cancer center, radiation oncology offers two state-of-the-art linear accelerators and provides ARC, IMRT, SBRT, SRS, 3D, and brachytherapy.

Located on the second floor of the cancer center is the medical oncology clinic and a 28-chair infusion suite, which is staffed by six registered nurses, one medical assistant, and registration staff. A USP800-compliant infusion-dedicated pharmacy sits adjacent to the infusion suite and is staffed by two pharmacists and three pharmacy technicians. Techs mix prescriptions on-site, and pharmacists review orders and doses and check all prepared medications.

The medical oncology clinic is staffed by three medical oncologists, each with a dedicated nurse and medical assistant, and one nurse practitioner. There are 12 exam rooms designed to accommodate the patients of four full-time physicians. When patients are referred to Spencer Cancer Center, their consult takes place in the medical oncology clinic, and a nurse navigator is dedicated to their case. Leadership is discussing the possibility of implementing a multidisciplinary clinic format in the cancer center.

Because the cancer center treats a rural patient population, travel poses a constant challenge to patients. There is minimal public transportation available to the residents of Opelika and the surrounding area, and many patients must drive 45 to 50 miles one way and some two to three hours to access services. To help patients better access cancer care, East Alabama Medical Center works with local hotels to provide patients rooms at a discount. In September, Spencer Cancer Center received a grant from the American Cancer Society’s South Region to help ease this burden on patients. The grant gave the cancer center \$10,000 to help patients pay for necessary transportation related to their care and treatment. The cancer center applies for this grant every year and relies on funding to help its patients receive timely care.

### A Holistic Suite of Services

Spencer Cancer Center prioritizes the needs of its patients through a variety of supportive care services available free of charge. Patients with cancer can self-refer or be referred by



up the cancer center's cancer registry. "Cancer registry is the heart of any cancer program," explains Sherer. "It collects all the data being reported internally and externally to state and national organizations." Leadership at Spencer Cancer Center are also looking into offering on-site genetics testing and counseling to save patients from further travel.

Co-located on the second floor of the facility with medical oncology is an on-site retail pharmacy that fills oncology and other prescriptions for patients. Nearby is a boutique that offers prosthetics, mastectomy bras, camisoles, and lymphedema sleeves as well as scarves, wigs, and now masks, giving patients a one-stop shop for their needs.

### Building Formal Partnerships

To bring the most advanced treatments to east central Alabama, Spencer Cancer Center has partnered with nearby universities to participate in studies and clinical trials. For example, the cancer center is partnering with the University of Alabama in a study on survivorship care that will investigate whether the current model of survivorship care is effective in a rural setting. The cancer center is also participating in a clinical trial with Auburn University through which researchers will connect Alabama's medically underserved areas with genetic testing to find risk variants in breast, ovarian, and prostate cancers.

Spencer Cancer Center also has its own in-house clinical trial program staffed by a clinical trials coordinator. The cancer center is not able to screen all patients for clinical trial participation because it is done manually, so the coordinator focuses on patients with the center's top five disease sites: prostate, breast, lung, colon, and bladder. It offers treatment and non-treatment clinical trials, and it accrued approximately 5 percent of its patients into a clinical trial in 2019.

Spencer Cancer Center continues to grow and adapt to the needs of its community, and its staff are proud of the cutting-edge treatment and compassionate care it brings to its patients. As Chris Waits, interim director of radiation oncology at Spencer Cancer Center explains, "When patients step foot in our facility, they know that we're here to offer the best care for them."

their care team. Two certified exercise therapists and two licensed massage therapists staff its Oncology Wellness Program. Because of COVID-19 the program is currently offering some of its services virtually. "Our two exercise therapists got very creative," says Sherer. "Some patients still had an interest in doing the program during the pandemic, so the therapists began doing both one-on-one and group exercise classes via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. We will

probably continue to offer these options to patients in the future."

Other support staff include a financial navigator, a social worker, three nurse navigators, a speech pathologist, and a dietitian. The cancer center recently implemented a telephone nurse triage program in which a dedicated nurse answers patient calls, identifies symptoms, and provides direction to patients if further care is needed. Five full-time remote staff make

## A Community That Cares

The cancer center that East Alabama Medical Center built in 1992 and used until 2019 had only 15,400 ft<sup>2</sup>. The oncology program was successful, but the facility had simply run out of space to provide the level of care and comfort that residents in the quickly growing region expected. When plans were announced to build a new facility, it was an easy sell for the hospital's foundation as they conducted the capital campaign for what would ultimately become Spencer Cancer Center.

The old facility was called the Cancer Center of East Alabama, and plans were to keep that name. However, when Auburn Bank President E. L. Spencer Jr. and his wife, Ruth Priester Spencer, decided to make a lead gift of \$2.5 million, the hospital decided to honor the philanthropic couple by naming it the Spencer Cancer Center. The Spencers had made other notable gifts to the hospital, particularly during Mr. Spencer's 26 years of service on the East Alabama Medical Center Board of Directors. He joined the board in 1982 and served as board chairman from 1990 to 2008.

In addition to the Spencer's generous gift, the physicians, employees, and community donated another \$4.6 million for a total of \$7.1 million. "Obviously, the Spencer's gift was significant—the largest single gift in the hospital's history—but the complete support from throughout the East Alabama Medical Center family and community was monumental," says Chris Clark, vice president of clinical services. "Our oncology team built such a strong reputation over the years that when we said we needed help to build a better facility for our patients, the community did not hesitate to step up strong." 

