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Promoting Cancer Awareness

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### Promoting Cancer Awareness

**T**he Greater Southeast Healthcare System, located in Washington, D.C., initiated its Komen Breast Cancer Community

Education Program in response to some disturbing cancer statistics: Breast cancer remains the second-leading cause of death for women in the District of Columbia. While nationally the mortality rate for women with breast cancer is decreasing, the mortality rate is increasing in the District, especially for the low-income African American population in Greater Southeast's service area.

"Women in our service area tend to seek treatment at a later stage of disease; cancer detected in advanced stages results in poorer prognoses," explained Jacquelyn Lendsey, vice president of corporate and community development. Through the Komen Breast Cancer Community Education Program, Greater Southeast has developed a breast cancer awareness campaign that promotes the benefits of early detection to increase women's participation in cancer screening.

The program, which is funded by the Washington Race for the Cure, provides breast cancer education and free cancer screening to low-income women in the District of Columbia. The program primarily targets women who confront physical and emotional barriers that prevent them from seeking treatment earlier.

Because lack of transportation prevents many women in the community from seeking early treatment, the program provides taxicab and bus vouchers for women to travel to Greater Southeast for screening. "We want to ensure that these and other barriers can never be reasons for avoiding screening," said Lendsey.

Education sessions take place in

comfortable, familiar settings such as homes, schools, churches, and libraries. The program funds a nurse educator who leads candid sessions on breast cancer, breast health, and breast self-examination. "The fact that many women are uncomfortable talking about their breasts is an emotional barrier that we work to overcome through open, informative education," said Lendsey.

At the close of each educational session, women who are older than age 35 or who have a family history of breast cancer are scheduled for free screening services at Greater Southeast. Women meet with a physician's assistant who completes a family history, reinforces breast self-examination, and explains the mammography process. A radiologist then performs a mammogram. The women are also screened for cervical cancer on the same day.

Women with positive test results receive assistance from cancer screening staff in selecting the most appropriate treatment setting. Through agreements with the Lombardi Cancer Center at Georgetown Medical Center and D.C. General Hospital, Greater Southeast is able to offer cancer treatment to indigent patients at no cost. Greater Southeast also screens participants for the Women's Health Education Research Project, which provides free cancer education to the mothers, daughters, and sisters of cancer survivors.

The screening appointment is only the first step in building a long-term relationship with women in the community, Lendsey said. Cancer screening staff regularly follow-up with participants to ensure they continue to attend annual screenings. "We want women to incorporate breast self-examination and cancer screening as a regular part of life," Lendsey said.

Just 5 percent of the those

women who are annually screened by Greater Southeast require treatment, a statistic that reflects Greater Southeast's success in their outreach and education efforts, Lendsey said. "We are teaching women that practicing breast self-examination is an easy, effective way to improve their chances should a problem arise."

#### **BROADENING THE TARGET POPULATION**

In a 1995 Greater Southeast community assessment, area residents ranked cancer as one of their greatest personal health concerns. In addition, residents reported interest in receiving more information about prostate, colon, and cervical cancers. "Our assessment identified the need to provide cancer information to populations not necessarily identified as being 'at risk,'" said Lendsey. "Our program had to expand to meet this need."

Although the Komen Breast Cancer Community Education Program is limited to women with low incomes, Greater Southeast reaches out to the entire community through the Belva Brisset Advocacy Center, which recruits volunteers to address community organizations about the benefits of breast cancer screening and the services offered by Greater Southeast.

Greater Southeast has also developed partnerships with local advocacy groups that canvass the community to deliver Greater Southeast's message. One such group is the Breast Cancer Resource Committee (BCRC), a Washington, D.C.-based clearinghouse of cancer information. BCRC presents education seminars to teach screening and prevention and to provide information on where people can access cancer services. "BCRC links the community, which needs information about available services and treatment, to the hospitals providing

them," said Zora Brown, BCRC chair of cancer awareness services.

BCRC works with local associations to provide education programs in unique settings. Programs include a cancer literature and video display in courthouses for people awaiting jury selection and brown-bag luncheon education programs at worksites. "We continuously

retailor our message to appeal to every segment of the community," Brown said. "Our goal is to educate everyone we can reach."

Greater Southeast and BCRC co-sponsor an annual cancer symposium to introduce a specific initiative, such as women's health or the role of the church in cancer awareness, and to offer models for ways in which

organizations can incorporate that initiative into their own programs.

The cooperative efforts with BCRC and other community groups have been the key to Greater Southeast's success, Lendsey said. "The more people we can educate and screen, the more chance we have of detecting cancer earlier and reducing the mortality rate." ■

*The Greater Southeast Community Healthcare System is a network of hospitals, long-term facilities, and community programs offering preventive and acute care to the residents of Southeast Washington, D.C., and southern Prince George's County, Md. The hospitals include the 450-bed Greater Southeast Community Hospital and its major Maryland subsidiary, the 33-bed Fort Washington Hospital. The Greater Southeast Subacute Nursing Unit opened in March 1994 to serve patients in*

*transition from acute to home care.*

#### **VITAL STATISTICS**

- Total system-wide bed size: 450
- Dedicated cancer unit beds: 28
- New analytic cancer patients seen each year: 400

#### **PATIENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

- Kellogg Community Connection's Dr. Feelgood Van distributes health care and community resource information throughout the community.
- Separate support groups are

offered for newly diagnosed cancer patients and for long-term cancer survivors.

- A Breast Prosthesis Clinic and the Post-Mastectomy Program help breast cancer patients improve mobility and functional ability after surgery.
- Individual nutrition counseling, insurance advocacy, and transportation assistance are available.
- Annual health fairs offer free screenings, activities, speakers, and demonstrations.

