A Community Report for

Winston County

Seniors Tackling Cancer
Today we talk more often of cancer survivors than cancer victims. Much progress has been made in prevention, early detection, treatment options, and care for those affected by the disease. Even so, it remains a scary word, and more than 13,000 Mississippians are likely to be diagnosed with cancer this year. Winston County has the fourth-highest cancer mortality rate in the state. The challenge for Winston County is to find community solutions to aid in the fight against cancer.

Based upon that need, the Seniors Tackling Cancer project was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities focus on prevention, early detection, and the ability to live with cancer. Though cancer affects people of all ages, it more frequently impacts seniors. While the project focuses on older residents, its output will likely benefit all age groups. The effort is supported by the Mississippi State Department of Health’s Comprehensive Cancer Control Program with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As part of this effort, a series of forums was held to involve the community in a dialogue focused on identifying the resources—and the challenges—to combating cancer. From that dialogue, a number of community action groups were formed to begin developing local solutions that would address their concerns related to cancer’s impact within the county.

This report has been developed to give voice to the findings of those forums and to the residents of Winston County who participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action. It is hoped that others reading this report will see it as more than an informational document. Civic organizations, churches, businesses, schools, public officials, and others may find opportunities in these findings to improve the health and quality of life of their fellow residents by participating in and taking actions supportive of reducing cancer’s impact on their families, friends, and neighbors.

As Dr. John Seffrin, CEO of the American Cancer Society has said, “About 100,000 people each year who would have died if cancer death rates had not declined are living to celebrate another birthday. That is undeniable evidence of the lifesaving progress that we as a country must dedicate ourselves to continuing.” Winston County is actively engaged in that effort today.
OBJECTIVES

To meet the goal of developing ways to more effectively address cancer within the county, the following objectives were established:

- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to focus on prevention, early detection, and the ability to live with cancer.

- Involve local residents in a volunteer program to educate others on cancer risk factors and the importance of early detection in combating cancer.

- Sustain interest in and support for cancer concerns within the local aging community as well as across Mississippi.
In mid-January and early February 2011, two public forums were held at MSU’s Winston County Extension Service office in Louisville. The intent of the forums was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support an individual’s ability to prevent, detect, or live with cancer. The dialogue focused on factors and resources in Winston County supportive of or detrimental to addressing cancer and its impact on older adults.

Given the opinions expressed in the forums, we asked what, if anything, the community wanted to do. Thirty-two individuals from across the county attended the first forum. Because the second forum took place during bad weather, attendance was minimal. However, it was representative of the views of participants in the previous forum.

The forums were conducted using a modified “World Café” format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in initiating table discussions of between six and eight individuals, and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. This process helps identify a group’s collective knowledge and enables people to join together to pursue common aims. The format helps communities better understand what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute or relinquish for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

- What are the elements in your county that encourage and support an individual’s ability to prevent, detect, or live with cancer?

- What elements in the community’s environment make it difficult for people to prevent, detect, or live with cancer?

- If you had three wishes, what changes would you make in your community to help address cancer and its impact on older adults?

- What efforts should be taken to increase the community’s awareness of ways to prevent, detect, and/or live with cancer?
When participants were asked to consider what was working in Winston County to foster one’s ability to address cancer, numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into three major categories: (1) Community influences; (2) Programs, services, and local resources; and (3) Other. Examples for each category are listed below:

**General Health and Fitness**
- Encouragement from cancer survivors
- Health bulletin boards at churches
- Volunteer who writes newsletters asking for prayers
- Support of family and friends
- Communications bring people together
- Exposure to survivors yields hope
- Sharing information on doctors and treatments
- Local culture of home and community-centered life
- Attitude of coping
- Prayer lists
- Strong focus on breast cancer
- Cancer Society very active

**Programs, Services, and Local Resources**
- Relay for Life
- BATTLE Luncheon
- Newspaper promotions
• Local hospital
• Local ads for early detection efforts
• Doctors push yearly checkups/screenings
• Hospice care
• Locally available mammograms and colonoscopies
• Cornerstone Clinic (free one evening a week)

Other
• Personal health habits
  o Healthy foods
  o Regular exercise
  o Control of stress levels
• Four-lane to Jackson

The forum responses are not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of addressing cancer within Winston County, but they are representative and indicate that the county starts from a position of strength in addressing this issue.

THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY

Having identified what was working in the county, forum participants were asked to consider what else was important and worth pursuing. If they had three wishes, what would they like to see added to or changed within the county? Following is a summary of the group’s suggestions:

• County volunteer program to help cancer patients, provide transportation to doctor visits, clean houses, etc
• Cancer clinic for the county
• Oncologist in the county once a week
• 6-week informational workshop providing details about what will happen with cancer
• Cancer support group
• More workshops like Seniors Tackling Cancer and Extension Service’s educational programs
• Hospital publicity about available programs
• Improved hospice care and greater availability of volunteers
• Train cancer survivors to visit and encourage folks dealing with active cancers
• Encourage screening for men and provide support for those with prostate cancer
• Central directory of available support services including financial information and assistance
• Wellness support groups for prevention
• Healthier food supply
• Better alternative treatment information from doctors/support groups
• Information and education to increase awareness

The “wishes” are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing. In the Community Action Group section below, we will discuss how the participants set priorities and began to focus on developing goals and action plans.

HOW TO ACCESS WHAT’S THERE

Throughout the forum process, we continuously discovered that resources often existed that people were unaware of and did not know how to access. A common dialogue would be a participant at Table A saying, “What we really need is X” and a participant at Table B saying, “I think X is available if you call such and such.” Often the issue becomes one of knowing what is available and how to navigate the system. Finding the needed information or service can present a complex and difficult web that may require more knowledge and persistence than the average person possesses. When asked where community members would most likely turn for information and how best to promote what works, the following suggestions were offered:

• Publish a report card on cancer showing how Winston County is doing
• Encourage people to have annual exams
• Encourage a positive attitude
• Need wellness support groups as well as cancer patient support groups
• Community volunteers to make people aware of what is available and what is needed
• Get involved in community activities
• Regular newspaper or radio ads featuring questions about cancer, including information about services that are available
• Visit cancer patients and help ward off depression
• Public Service Announcements about cancer
• Involve county officials and media
• Get information from the hospital on what is currently available
• Packet of information for all people diagnosed with cancer (how to survive your particular kind of cancer)
• Utilize mayor’s community volunteer group
• Have a North Mississippi Medical Center representative come to Winston County
• Help in discerning controversial information
• Individualized information (one treatment does not fit all)

Complicated searches and stumbling blocks can be demotivating and may prevent people from taking action. Ease of access to publicly promoted information and person-to-person assistance when needed were considered hallmarks of usefulness.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

With a view toward addressing some of the deficits identified by the forum participants, we asked that they identify some challenges to tackling cancer within the county. Following are the obstacles cited:

• Genetic risk factors
• Some people are reluctant to admit they have a problem
• 5-hour drive to nearest treatment facility
• High poverty
• Loss of jobs
• No public transportation unless on Medicaid
• Lack of communication (information not shared in the public realm)
• People don’t know what is available
• People help for a period of time, but not for an extended time
• Lack of public information about toxins
• Lack of insurance inhibits people from taking steps toward early detection
• Some doctors imply they can do the same as major cancer centers
• Lack of informational workshops
• Limited medical availability, lack of cancer specialists, difficulty getting a second opinion
• Caregivers need support
• People have difficulty supporting people who pursue alternative treatments
• Lack of a support group
• Need local group of survivors to encourage others
• Need more local church involvement to cover all areas of need related to cancer
• Find ways to address fear of cancer and to motivate cancer patients
• Education and training for volunteers—helping volunteers become more comfortable with cancer patients
• Coordinated effort for transportation via volunteer involvement
• Finding ways to make wellness social—healthy lifestyle partners for accountability, wellness companions, etc.

Understanding and addressing potential roadblocks will help pave the way for a healthier future.

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the final forum, we asked participants to consider the “Three Wishes” identified at the earlier forum and determine two or three projects that the community could and should accomplish. From the priorities established in this discussion we would form community action groups to tackle the identified projects. Forum participants identified the following three areas as their top priorities:

• Develop a volunteer program
  o Assist cancer patients
  o Develop a support group for patients and for caregivers
  o Train and educate volunteers
• Produce a central directory of support services
• Make wellness social—healthy lifestyle partners for accountability, wellness companions, etc.
Throughout the process that led to the establishment of community action groups, we stressed that success would only come if the community took responsibility for and leadership of any potential projects. The projects would not be university driven; our intent was to facilitate a process, engage the community, and offer guidance when possible. Day-to-day development and long-term sustainability would only come through community ownership.

To that end, we conducted a “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop subsequent to the establishment of the community action groups. The workshop brought interested individuals together and helped each group establish goals and action plans.

**EARLY SUCCESSES**

This is a preliminary report. The work of the community action groups has just begun. Early successes include initiating calls of encouragement to cancer patients and their caregivers. Anecdotally, the volunteers have helped provide food for individuals who are financially challenged by cancer. The group plans to talk with a local food pantry about additional possibilities. As the community walks this walk, part of what they are likely to find is that one challenge frequently leads to another—all of which provide opportunities to serve. The volunteer group is currently focused on recruiting additional members to their effort so that they can better structure and extend their help within the community. They have publicized their endeavor in the newspaper, on the radio, and on Facebook; group members are personally inviting others they know to participate.

The wellness support group has begun by attempting to define “wellness” and the activities and services conducive to producing a state of wellness. What may have seemed like a relatively simple task has increased their awareness that the word represents a variety of meanings and components to different individuals. Further, the multiplicity of approaches that an individual may take in attempting to address his or her own personal wellness needs may vary significantly from a community approach to wellness. The group’s focus now is on finding common ground and determining initial actions that can provide visibility to their mission of encouraging wellness in the community by supporting health-oriented groups’ interactions and activities. To this end, they have begun identifying wellness-directed activities and opportunities in the community and are actively recruiting other individuals to join their effort. A newspaper article featured the Seniors Tackling Cancer groups’ goals and highlighted the work of other wellness-oriented community activities.
All groups recognize that a major need is simply knowing what resources exist within the county to assist in the battle against cancer. The Seniors Tackling Cancer resource directory community action group has joined their efforts with a group that was in the process of developing a broader community resource directory. They have begun collecting relevant information that will be incorporated into the more extensive county directory. Partnering has the advantage of combining resources to create a greater community benefit.

Five Winston County individuals attended the Combating Cancer Volunteer training. They will be delivering presentations to other community members on such topics as prevention and early detection of breast, prostate, lung, and colorectal cancer. In the first 7 weeks since their training, the five volunteers have reported contacting and making presentations to 53 community members. Information on preventing cancer is beginning to spread through Winston County!

**NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action teams formed around only a small number of those ideas, hopefully the remainder will not be lost. **Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations, and government leaders can review the “Three Wishes” list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the health of the community and efforts to combat cancer.** The list is far from exhaustive and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the issue might envision other possibilities. A church might consider developing a support group for members suffering with cancer as well as the family members who care for them. A civic organization might decide to take on prostate cancer and give it the visibility in the community that the BATTLE Luncheon provides for breast cancer. Local businesses may find ways to encourage employee wellness through lunchtime walking groups, after-work sports opportunities, lunch and learn sessions on cancer prevention, and so on. And, most significantly, you can consider
joining one of the community action groups described in this report. For information on how to connect with one of these groups, contact the Mississippi State University Extension Service’s Winston County office at (662) 773-3091.

Winston County is a great place to live, but opportunities to improve quality of life are plentiful. By tackling issues surrounding the prevention, early detection, and ability to live with cancer, those improvements can become a reality. We hope you will join in the effort to make Winston County a place for a healthy future. Now is the time to reduce the burden of cancer placed upon the community.

FACTS AND FIGURES

• Mississippi ranks 25th in the nation in the rate of cancer incidence, but third in the rate of deaths attributable to cancer.

• Winston County has the fourth-highest cancer mortality rate in the state.

• Winston County ranks 45 out of 81 (one county not ranked) in overall health outcomes for the state.

• 16 percent of the population of Winston County is 65 or older, compared to 13 percent for the state as a whole.
• Health behavior concerns that contribute to the prevalence of cancer within Winston County:
  o 23 percent of adults are reported current smokers.
  o 36 percent of adults are estimated to be obese.
  o 34 percent of county adults report no leisure time physical activity.

_Seniors Tackling Cancer: A Community Report for Winston County_ was prepared in late spring 2011 by the following Mississippi State University Extension Service Seniors Tackling Cancer team members:

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Throughout the preparation of this report, no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants’ involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voices will be an impetus to additional actions that support combating cancer and supporting a healthy future for Winston County.

The project team would also like to express our thanks to Dr. Rita Tanksley, Mr. Mike Skipper, and other Winston County Extension Service office staff members for their support of and participation in the project. Additionally, we thank Ms. Josephine Tate, Extension Service area health agent, for her assistance in training the Combating Cancer Volunteers.

For additional information or assistance in joining one of the established community action groups, please contact project leader Bonnie Carew at bcarew@ext.msstate.edu or the Mississippi State University Extension Service’s Winston County office at (662) 773-3091.
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