

# A Regional Navigators' Network

A First-person perspective

by **Debbie Williams, RN**

I am a breast health specialist and breast cancer patient navigator at Alexian Brothers Health System. I am also a breast cancer survivor. One important aspect of my role as a breast health specialist and breast cancer patient navigator is to be available for all and not limit the possibilities. I am fortunate and proud to work at a community cancer center that has valued the navigator role for more than nine years and has a well-established navigator program.



One of my favorite quotes and one that I use today when I talk with my own breast cancer patients is—*To know the road ahead, ask those coming back*. These words sum up perfectly the value of our regional Network of Navigators in the Chicago area. Our Network has been meeting for a year now, and we often find it difficult to end our meetings on time because of the networking opportunities available. We have forged a bond between us based

on the new trails we are blazing!

Many patient navigators at facilities in our region are still working to break down barriers and establish their programs. They face many challenges including gaining approval and acceptance from their colleagues and caregivers. At the outset of navigation services, physicians may be uncertain of the navigator's role in patient care and may feel threatened. When working with new physicians who are unfamiliar with my patient navigator role, I explain that I serve as an extension of their office and can work alongside them to provide patients with the resources and information they need in order to feel in control and supported throughout their cancer journey. It can take years to earn the trust and support needed to be able to reach and help those who would benefit the most. Sometimes even the patients themselves are cautious about letting us slip into their lives at a time when they feel the most vulnerable and lost. However, patients soon recognize the navigator's value and that our office is a safe and secure place.

In the same way that a new patient learns to navigate the healthcare system when diagnosed, we navigators are learning where and how to help patients in need so that our services will have the greatest impact. Our Network of Navigators is unique because our group is open to all navigators—those who are hoping to start a program as well as experienced navigators in an established program. Among our group are nurse navigators—the largest segment—and community-based navigators who provide education on detection and prevention and how to access the healthcare system for screenings and care. The need for navigation in

our region is great, especially with our underserved populations.

Our community has excellent resources available for patients, and our regional navigators' network is an opportunity for us to share information about these local resources. We also help support each other and network about ways in which we've succeeded in overcoming barriers to patient navigation. Our regional navigators' network is also a support group, providing an opportunity to share how difficult it can be to cope with the loss of a patient.

We meet quarterly, with each meeting held at a different facility in the region. We tour each others centers and work places and see firsthand what others have been able to accomplish. Our meetings start with an educational presentation, followed by networking and information sharing. We discuss the community we serve and the challenges we face. I encourage all communities to try and establish such a group. The networking possibilities and partnership opportunities are invaluable. ✓

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