Using Project ECHO and Patient Navigation to Improve the Health and Wellness of Cancer Survivors in Rural Communities

Background

Rural populations in the United States face higher cancer death rates than urban populations, despite lower overall cancer incidence.\textsuperscript{1} CDC conducted a pilot study to reduce health inequities experienced by rural cancer survivors. Four National Comprehensive Cancer Control Program (NCCCP) sites in Kansas, Montana, Nevada, and South Carolina were funded to implement Project ECHO’s telementoring platform and engage patient navigators to enhance care for cancer survivors in rural communities.

Project Activities

Project ECHO

Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) uses telementoring within communities of practice to increase workforce capacity and enhance the knowledge and skills of rural health care providers (HCPs). Staff at NCCCP sites collaborated with various partners to:

- Conduct telementoring sessions with HCP teams.
- Plan and host ECHO sessions for health care teams, including physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, patient navigators, and social workers serving rural areas, to:
  - Provide education on the needs and issues faced by rural cancer survivors.
  - Improve and increase medical and social support services provided to rural cancer survivors.

Patient Navigation

Cancer patient navigation aims to remove barriers to health and mental health care. Staff at NCCCP sites collaborated with rural clinics to:

- Identify cancer survivors.
- Link HCPs and cancer survivors to state and local resources.
- Partner with a rural federally qualified health center to connect cancer survivors with patient navigators.
- Help patient navigators refer cancer survivors to wellness programs.
Project Achievements

Project ECHO

21 ECHO sessions were delivered.

79% of ECHO session participants said they intended to apply what they learned during the sessions.

240 participants attended ECHO sessions.

92% of participants said they learned something during the sessions.

Patient Navigation

16 patient navigators were trained to serve cancer survivors in rural areas.

164 survivors were helped by patient navigators.

Keys to Success

- Establish clinical partnerships with primary care associations and federally qualified health centers that serve cancer survivors.
- Align site and partner goals for sustained commitment.
- Develop a clear understanding among HCP teams of their role in cancer survivorship.
- Use patient navigation software to track contacts between patient navigators and cancer survivors.
- Develop and execute a strong marketing plan to reach intended cancer survivor populations.
- Adapt materials from existing evidence-based programs and resources to save time and effort.