

## **PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Giving thanks, getting checked**

### **Program removes cost barriers to mammogram**

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In "Heartsounds," a moving account about life-changing struggle against disease and death, author Martha Weinman Lear wrote, "Women agonize ... over cancer; we take as a personal threat the lump in every friend's breast."

It was for this good reason to energize awareness and action to combat breast cancer that pink ribbons adorned everything from coffee cups and T-shirts to storefronts and football games this past month.

It is true that much progress has taken place in the fight against breast cancer in recent years. Indeed, the national death rate started a decline in 1990. That continues to this date.

Still, the disease remains a leading cause of death for women, taking more than 39,000 lives across the nation each year. In Tom Green County, more than 140 women were diagnosed between 2007 and 2011. That adds up to an incidence rate of more than five cases for every 1,000 local women in the 40 and older "at-risk" age group.

As vital as advances in treatment are to progress toward reducing breast cancer deaths, another set of factors with less star power than a new cancer breakthrough is immensely important. These factors involve early detection through screening.

Early detection begins with awareness and the kind of practical education that helps women conduct regular and effective self-examinations. Beyond that — it is a shame to have to say so — too many women must overcome obstacles in the health care system itself.

There are more than 26,000 women age 40 and older in Tom Green County. According to current medical recommendations, they should be getting mammograms every one or two years. If these women are like their sister-peers across West Texas, however, about 35 percent (or more than 9,000) of them have not had a mammogram within the recommended time.

Lack of access to the health system looms large as a reason why women fail to get screened on a timely basis. About 3,700 Tom Green County women older than 40 (14 percent) live on poverty-level incomes amounting to less than \$11,000 per year if they are single and \$23,000 if they are part of a standard family of four.

Another 5,500 (21 percent) live on modest incomes only slightly above the poverty level and ranging up to no more than \$46,000 for a family of four.

Altogether, about 4,300 (16 percent) local women age 40 and older have no health insurance and many more have high-deductible plans that provide little or no coverage for prevention and screening services.

If last month was for breast cancer awareness, this month is for Thanksgiving. And women in San Angelo and the Concho Valley have great thanks to give this year, especially those who have been pushed away from mammogram screening by obstacles to the health system.

ABC4WT stands for Access to Breast Care for West Texas. ABC4WT is a program supported by the Cancer Prevention Research Institute of Texas through the Laura W. Bush Institute for Women's Health at Angelo State University. Similar projects also are ongoing at other Laura W. Bush Institute locations in Amarillo and Lubbock.

ABC4WT at ASU's Laura W. Bush Institute has masterfully organized a coalition of hospitals and health care professionals to provide mammograms at no cost to underserved women 40 and older residing in Tom Green County or one of 13 additional surrounding counties in the Concho Valley region.

The program focuses on women who are uninsured or burdened by high insurance deductibles that create cost barriers to screening services such as a mammogram. Some may live in low-income households, but the program uniquely extends service to women with household incomes going up to 400 percent of the poverty threshold (about \$7,684 per month for a family of four).

ABC4WT's action coalition is rapidly blooming into a model for how to solve problems through collaboration. Both of San Angelo's medical centers, Community and Shannon, are ABC4WT mammogram providers along with the Sonora's Lillian M. Hudspeth Hospital and Brady's Heart of Texas Memorial Hospital.

Building out from these core provider partners, the coalition networks more than 10 community organizations that support mammogram services by providing referrals, transportation and outreach assistance.

The coalition also conducts fundraising events for the special account that will provide a down payment for breast cancer treatment in the event that a mammogram provided by the program leads to a heartbreaking diagnosis.

Together, these organizations have already lifted the lives of 64 women who, before ABC4WT, had been living under a veil of smothering agony and worry that Lear wrote

about in "Heartsounds." As one of the ABC4WT women explained: "I don't know what I would have done, had this program not helped me. Thank you so much."

ABC4WT has created many individual life-lifting stories and there are surely more to come. Every instance of someone touched is precious.

At the same time, the ABC4WT story itself is hugely important for San Angelo and other local communities. Other noteworthy local coalitions tell the same story as they tackle important community problems such as hunger and nutrition, affordable housing or drug and alcohol abuse.

The story of ABC4WT and those other noteworthy coalitions is a clear one about community change and development. The story applies to every community booster who thinks the sky is the limit for how high we can fly. It also applies to every skeptic believing that nothing will ever change, and to the rudest critics or cynics among us.

The story is simply this: Communities change for the better when the people and their organizations pitch in together. So, PITCH IN!

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