

# Community Connections



KEEPING OUR COMMUNITIES CONNECTED AND ENGAGED

From The Director's Desk

Issue 13, April 2021

## NATIONAL MINORITY HEALTH MONTH

While we are still working remotely and are socially distanced, that arrangement has certainly not slowed activity within our office.

During the many years I have been with the office, I have seen true acts of generosity, compassion and selflessness. This past year has only magnified those actions. Each of you has gone above and beyond to ensure that our communities continue to receive the information and services needed.

April is National Minority Health Month, an effort to raise attention to health disparities experienced by racial and ethnic minority populations in our nation. The disproportionate burden of cancer on minority populations makes it clear that the work we do as an office today remains as essential as the day we began 25 years ago.



## NATIONAL MINORITY HEALTH MONTH

These inequities are mostly related to social factors rather than biological differences. Social factors that contribute to health outcomes include economic status and access to information and treatment.

The pandemic has forced us to change the way we communicate with communities, yet the commitment to our message and mission has remained consistent.

We appreciate the confidence that all of our residents, partners and coworkers

have in us and in the work we deliver. It is that trust that urges us to do even more.

Please continue to share with us your comments and ideas on how we may continue to evolve as we strive to reach and positively impact even more audiences.

Many thanks for your continued dedication, encouragement and support.

– *Claudia*

## O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER

UAB THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

**Claudia Hardy** – Program Director  
[chardy@uab.edu](mailto:chardy@uab.edu)

**Tara Bowman** – Program Manager  
[tbowman@uab.edu](mailto:tbowman@uab.edu)

**Rochelle Wallace** – Health Initiatives Manager  
[rlw365@uab.edu](mailto:rlw365@uab.edu)

**Joseph D. Bryant** – Newsletter Editor  
[josephbryant@uab.edu](mailto:josephbryant@uab.edu)

## Colorectal Cancer Awareness

X M F E H F F I P K S H M L B A G R Q U Z Q F V  
R E C N A C L A T C E R T E N Q M A U Q F A O P  
Q L P I L G U J K G K D D N J X Y K G C L N N E  
C W A J J Q I F A I H F A M I L Y H I S T O R Y  
F C V U E D Q B Y H N L H A Y A S F T Q U B C Z  
A P Y D Z N O I T C E T E D Y L R A E R N O T O  
T I P F U K F H Q Z Q L F T F Z S E Q O L K A A  
S C O W E W O N E P J D O F P M T N W B I Q X G  
Y K C E U G J F J Y I Q D B S M I F D J R U R C  
H F S K R W X R N V T O O U L X R A Z W B N B Z  
D V O D Q E N U I Y S I O X Y J X N V E B R K P  
O R N P L J U A T K B S S D F T W O D P T H B M  
O P O I F D Y G D W E Q T E X D V I X R H H H A  
I D L M M I F E J C N Y C D B N N W O E D V U F  
H S O V N V U F H H J R K M O O A E W V K R U U  
I L C U S I A I G Z G P X D R P O B P E B K M J  
E F P A Q Q O F E H N X Q G L J U O Y N C H I G  
U L W E K Y S T Z M I Z A U E K L G E T Z T M V  
E H X M X C O Y J P N L E U M Y N S C A H R Z H  
P E X C D B G I R R E O W D P C S F J B M W E G  
P C O L O N C A N C E R C S M M G P I L U C W E  
F N U I K G F A H G R M V O T G O T B E W A A W  
L L C V S W Z B C G C H E X C P I C L D V A H K  
F V I E C B P L C U S G X T Y B S G B K H V D S

- Early Detection
- Preventable
- Polyps
- Family History
- Obesity
- Age Fifty
- Screening
- Rectal Cancer
- Colon Cancer
- Colonoscopy

COMMUNITY PROFILE

**BUILDING BRIDGES: LATEST ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS HELP EXTEND CANCER EDUCATION AND OUTREACH EFFORTS TO DIVERSE HISPANIC COMMUNITIES**

Throughout its years, the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement has relied on community partners to form strategies that reach previously overlooked groups. Two of the newest members of the Community Advisory Board are serving as guides to help address health disparities among Alabama's Latino population.

Board members Vanessa Vargas and Jean Hernandez are partners in expanding outreach efforts to reach a Spanish-speaking audience through community collaboration and culturally-relevant, inclusive messaging.

"Throughout the years, our cancer center has worked to ensure that we provided outreach to racial and ethnic communities that have huge cancer disparities, specifically African American and Latino populations," said Claudia Hardy, Program Director for the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement. "The addition of Jean and Vanessa to our Community Advisory Board helps us to further reach these communities."

Both members bring years of experience in serving a growing and diverse Latino community. Vargas is Manager of Latino News and Hernandez serves as Director of the Alabama Latino Aids Coalition.

**VANESSA VARGAS**  
Vargas arrived in Alabama

from her native Colombia at age five. Her father, Jairo Vargas, was a civil engineer and her mother was an interior designer.

Still, the family needed guidance in how to start over in their newly adopted community. They first settled in Etowah County.

"When you are an immigrant, you look for help," Vargas said. "Normally when immigrants come here, we go to nonprofits or churches. In our case, we went to St. James Catholic Church."

It was at St. James that the priest recommended her father create a newsletter for the parish. He would also need to sell ads to pay for the printing costs.

An unmet community need was filled. The small Spanish language publication began to grow from a monthly, to a biweekly and finally a weekly publication.

"That's how the newspaper started," Vargas said.

Vargas remembers sitting in the back of the family's Ford Explorer surrounded by newspapers. It was her job to put the bundles together for delivery.

"Throughout that time I was learning English," she said. "Eventually I started being more involved. And now I'm here."

Vargas said the pandemic has underscored the need for communities to unite in



Vanessa Vargas

support of one another. Her partnership with OCOE is an example.

"It's being intentional about who your reaching out to," Vargas explained. "It's not as hard as you think. It's a matter of picking up the phone and sending an email. We all want to grow. We all want a voice. It is empowering and beautiful when you say, 'I want to be intentional, how do we move forward?'"

Now a multimedia company with social media posts and a daily broadcast presence, Vargas has helped position Latino News as a trusted resource to a diverse, multinational, Spanish-speaking community that spans much of the state.

The focus on cancer is personal for Vargas. Both her grandmother and uncle died from cancer. Working with OCOE, Vargas is ready to help disseminate valuable information about screening and treatment.

"It's being proactive about your health," she said. "We've learned during



Jean Hernandez

the pandemic that life is a very precious thing. The diseases that affect us don't discriminate."

Vargas' partnership with OCOE is also a homecoming. She graduated from UAB with an undergraduate degree in human resource management and a master's degree in business administration.

"I tell people that I'm a community connector. I have two cultures in me and I love building that bridge," she explained. "We all need the same resources and have the same needs. For me it's important that people try to understand that we're not all that different."

**JEAN HERNANDEZ**  
Hernandez's cell phone number is a lifeline to the dozens of men and women who reach out to her for help. Whether it is day or night, the time doesn't matter. Hernandez will always answer.

Hernandez has served as Director of the Alabama Latino Aids Coalition, a

## Community Connections

program of AIDS Alabama since 2011. Early on, she quickly learned that community outreach meant much more than having the ability to provide services and resources. She had to go into communities and establish trust.

“I understood that it was about coming to them,” Hernandez said. “It took me a while to do the work that I am doing right now.”

The agency began hosting health fairs and operating a mobile testing unit. Currently, more than 40 clients living with HIV receive housing and transportation support from the Coalition.

Once the Coalition became known as a trusted resource, Hernandez discovered that the needs of her clients extended beyond her core mission of HIV awareness and support. The need

for legal assistance and help with immigration were consistent issues. Hernandez then worked to expand the agency’s reach by partnering with other agencies.

“We began to see a lot of other needs in the community,” she recalled. “We also have immigration financial assistance for our clients living with HIV. It’s a barrier, and we knew that a lot of people could not afford an immigration lawyer.”

The Coalition stands at the intersection of HIV services, immigration, legal services and healthcare accessibility. Each is interconnected, Hernandez explained. Fear over immigration status has prevented some people from seeking lifesaving treatment.

In addition to access to healthcare, other quality of

life issues for families have been enhanced with the Coalition’s assistance.

For example, the group recently helped a husband and wife obtain legal assistance to secure their immigration status. Now they are helping the couple’s daughter, who has dreams of going to college, following her recent high school graduation.

“Now we can apply for the visa and the paperwork so she can go to college,” Hernandez said.

In its expanded capacity, the coalition also coordinates support groups focusing on family issues, mental health and LGBTQ members of the community.

Hernandez said the latest partnership with the Cancer Center provides another resource for the Coalition to better service its clients.

Hernandez specifically wants to enhance cancer outreach efforts regarding prostate and breast cancer. She called the partnership with the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center a natural fit.

The Cancer Center, through the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement, offers valuable information, while the Coalition has the ability to reach a population that would greatly benefit from that information, she said.

“I want to make it pertinent for them,” Hernandez said. “What is the next step so that we can begin to educate people on all these cancers? I am learning a lot. It is important that my colleagues and peers know. I am excited to begin the collaboration.”

## ANSWER KEY

### Colorectal Cancer Awareness

X M F E H F F I P K S H M L B A G R Q U Z Q F V  
**R E C N A C L A T C E R T E N Q M A U Q F A O P**  
 Q L P I L G U J K G K D D N J X Y K G C L N N E  
 C W A J J Q I F A I H F A M I L Y H I S T O R Y  
 F C V U E D Q B Y H N L H A Y A S F T Q U B C Z  
 A P Y D Z N O I T C E T E D Y L R A E R N O T O  
 T I P F U K F H Q Z Q L F T F Z S E Q O L K A A  
 S C O W E W O N E P J D O F P M T N W B I Q X G  
 Y K C E U G J F J Y I Q D B S M I F D J R U R C  
 H F S K R W X R N V T O O U L X R A Z W B N B Z  
 D V O D Q E N U I Y S I O X Y J X N V E B R K P  
 O R N P L J U A T K B S S D F T W O D P T H B M  
 O P O I F D Y G D W E Q T E X D V I X R H H H A  
 I D L M M I F E J C N Y C D B N N W O E D V U F  
 H S O V N V U F H H J R K M O O A E W V K R U U  
 I L C U S I A I G Z G P X D R P O B P E B K M J  
 E F P A Q Q O F E H N X Q G L J U O Y N C H I G  
 U L W E K Y S T Z M I Z A U E K L G E T Z T M V  
 E H X M X C O Y J P N L E U M Y N S C A H R Z H  
 P E X C D B G I R R E O W D P C S F J B M W E G  
**P C O L O N C A N C E R C S M M G P I L U C W E**  
 F N U I K G F A H G R M V O T G O T B E W A A W  
 L L C V S W Z B C G C H E X C P I C L D V A H K  
 F V I E C B P L C U S G X T Y B S G B K H V D S

- Early Detection**
- Preventable**
- Polyps**
- Family History**
- Obesity**
- Age Fifty**
- Screening**
- Rectal Cancer**
- Colon Cancer**
- Colonoscopy**



# THE RESEARCH CORNER

## A LIFE'S WORK: DR. ISABEL SCARINCI CONTINUES MISSION TO ERADICATE CERVICAL CANCER AND SERVE COMMUNITIES WORLDWIDE

The list of Dr. Isabel Scarinci's projects, accomplishments and ongoing research runs pages long and carries worldwide significance. Yet, as Professor in the UAB Division of Preventive Medicine and Senior Advisor for Globalization and Cancer at O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, Scarinci remains unsatisfied until one specific goal is reached.

"My dream is to see the end of cervical cancer as a public health problem, because we have the tools to prevent the disease," she said. "If we vaccinate boys and girls and screen adult women, then we will eliminate that cancer as a public health problem. That is why the Community Health Advisor (CHA) model is so critical, because we have the tools. We need to continue partnering with these trusted community members to get HPV vaccination and screening to our communities."

Scarinci's association with the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement goes back nearly 20 years. She was intrigued when she learned of work taking place at UAB using the CHA model.

"That's what actually attracted me to UAB, the work Drs. Edward Partridge and Mona Fouad were doing at the Cancer Center," she said.

In 2002, she moved to Birmingham and joined the

Deep South Network with Partridge, the former Cancer Center director and a founder of OCOE.

"As we evolved, we kept refining the model," Scarinci said. "The most important piece is really equipping volunteers to promote behavior change because they can then generalize to promoting engagement in other behaviors beyond vaccination and screening. For example, we train Community Health Workers in Brazil to assist women to quit smoking which is much more complex behavior than screening."

Work that began in Alabama and Mississippi then went international, including Brazil, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands. This work has been bidirectional as she brings the lessons learned in these countries back to Alabama and Mississippi. Her association with OCOE continues, most recently in a partnership with 17 cancer centers nationwide working to better understand the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to cancer prevention, early detection, care, and survivorship.

The cancer centers conducted surveys among healthy volunteers and cancer survivors nationwide about their health and well-being during the pandemic. The UAB

portion of the project was successful with more than 600 surveys completed. In all, the study will result in data on several thousand people. This information will help researchers better understand the impact of the pandemic on the cancer continuum.

Her work has gone beyond research. For example, Scarinci's outreach work among Alabama's Latinx population remains ongoing through the Sowing the Seeds of Health (Sembrando las Semillas de la Salud) program. The program's Community Health Advisors or "Promotoras de Salud," are recruited from the Latinx community to promote health and connect individuals to affordable health care providers.

The entire program is in Spanish. It began as a research project with successful results that she turned into a longstanding outreach program as a partnership between the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, the Alabama Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program and multiple health care providers. The goal of the program is to reduce breast and cervical cancer rates among Latina immigrants. Over the last 16 years more than 4,000 women have been screened in Jefferson, Shelby, Madison, Limestone, DeKalb and Marshall Counties.



**Dr. Isabel Scarinci**

Scarinci compares today's fight against cervical cancer to efforts to eradicate polio decades earlier. She knows it well. Scarinci in 1963 was a baby with polio, an illness many thought would forever remain a threat to children. She said her mother could have never imagined that a vaccine would eventually eradicate the threat of the debilitating disease. Likewise, cervical cancer now has a vaccine and screenings available.

"It is a life's work for me," she said. Scarinci said CHAs will continue to be invaluable partners in the fight against all cancers and specifically cervical cancer.

"The message here is, having our soldiers and having our ambassadors out there giving the messages, that's how we are going to address cancer as a public health problem in this country," she said. "What is missing here is really getting the word out. That's what I am working on as hard as I can, because I think we can do it. We need to do what we did for polio."

## O'NEAL CANCER CENTER JOINS NATIONAL CONVERSATION IN CONFERENCE ON SOLUTIONS TO SOLVING HEALTH DISPARITIES AFFECTING AFRICAN AMERICANS



Michael Scott



The O'Neal Cancer Center joined with other national health leaders to discuss strategies and policies to overcome barriers to health equity in the back community.

The virtual 2021 State of Black Health National Conference March 2-3 was presented by the Center for Black Health & Equity.

Claudia Hardy, Program Director in the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement, was a panelist. This year's conference tackled cancer, gun violence, mental health and a myriad of other critical public health issues.

"Not only did we want this conference to spotlight the intersectionality of these disparities, but to also outline a national policy platform to address those disparities," said Michael Scott, Chronic Disease Program Manager for the Center for Black Health & Equity.

"As current conditions in the U.S. aren't conducive to positive health outcomes in African American communities; unless a new policy agenda is developed and implemented, the pursuit of African American health equity could remain out of reach."

The Center also presents the annual "No Menthol Sunday" observance to promote education around the danger of tobacco products. The 2021 "No Menthol Sunday" is May 16.

## Minority Cancer Disparities: A Discussion on Cultural Barriers

April is Minority Health Month. Join the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement as we explore the cultural barriers minorities face. We'll discuss cancer and health disparities from a global context.



Guest Speaker:

Isabel C. Scarinci, PhD, MPH  
Professor, UAB Division of Preventive Medicine

**THURSDAY**  
**APRIL 29, 2021**  
**5:30 PM**

JOIN VIA PHONE OR ZOOM

**REGISTER:**  
[GO.UAB.EDU/COE-BARRIERS](https://go.uab.edu/coe-barriers)

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF OUTREACH &amp; ENGAGEMENT

## LAYING THE FOUNDATION: DR. MONA FOUAD RECALLS EARLIEST DAYS OF OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT



As we mark 25 year of the Office of Outreach and Community Engagement, we want to hear from CHAs who have served 20 years or more. Please contact your local county coordinator. We plan to spotlight you in coming months.

Before there were grants or formalized agreements, Dr. Mona Fouad recalls burgeoning community relationships and a shared vision to tackle major health inequities in some of the state's most challenged communities.

Fouad remembers the earliest days of the Office of Community Outreach and Engagement (OCOE) 25 years ago. Fouad and former Cancer Center Director Dr. Edward Partridge, were co-leaders on cancer control programs designed to address the dramatic disparity in cancer mortality rates.

"We both had the same mission, which was to address the health disparities in cancer within our state," said Fouad, Senior Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion in the School of Medicine and Professor and Director of the UAB Division of Preventive Medicine.

"More African Americans were dying from cancer than majority populations. "We started by just going to the community and establishing some committees and coalitions of interested individuals. People were genuine about getting together."

Fouad will be a featured guest this month during a virtual panel conversation marking the 25th anniversary of OCOE. As one of its members of the office, Fouad has a unique perspective on the earliest days of OCOE and its decades of evolution and expansion. The event is part of a series of activities this year celebrating the founding of the office.

Early on, Fouad said it was clear that a community-based approach was the way to address the challenges.

"If the problem is in the community, then the solution is going to come from the community," she said.

"Based on that, we started to think that if we trained and built capacity in the community, then they could be the support system to promote cancer screening and cancer control. That's where the Community Health Advisor model came in."

Grant support then followed, resulting in the Deep South Network for Cancer Control. The Deep South Network reached urban Birmingham-area communities, down to rural Black Belt and extended into the Mississippi Delta. The



Dr. Mona Fouad

Deep South Network created the template for how OCOE currently operates.

"We did the training, which was very structured training on how to listen, how to communicate and how to identify resources," Fouad said.

"But then we left them to develop the messages on their own. We didn't impose on them. This brought a lot of creativity. Each county had a completely different approach on how to convey the message."

Various community-led activities included fashion shows, plays and poetry reading, and one one-on-one conversations at neighborhood beauty shops.

"The message was the same the message about early detection, but they did it the way they wanted to do it," Fouad said. "Coming from the community is not coming from the scientists at UAB, which made a huge impact. We understood that women would listen and be more trusting of their peers."

Fouad was surprised by the high level of community enthusiasm for the program early on. Everyone was a volunteer.

“I wondered, ‘Why are they here?’” she remembered thinking.

She soon learned why.

They were the women that wanted to help their sick friends or their neighbors or themselves.

They were empowered and they were motivated to help. Their passion was just contagious and you learned a lot from them. Every time I left the meeting, I went out more inspired.”

Partridge officially retired from the Cancer Center in 2017, but his partnership with Fouad continues. He is now collaborating with her on new initiatives.

“I got him out of retirement,” she said. “We never said goodbye.”

As Fouad continues her research and advocacy as the Founding Director of the UAB Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Center (MHRC), she said lessons learned in the early days of OCOE remain relevant.

“I found out that if you targeted and worked

with people one on one and understood the challenges, then you could make a difference,” she said.

“You can’t do anything without true partnership with the community. We have to do more listening. Don’t underestimate the community’s resources, because they have a lot to give.”

## O'NEAL CANCER CENTER PARTNERS IN STUDY TO INCREASE LUNG CANCER CLINICAL TRIAL PARTICIPATION RATES AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

The O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center is partnering with the GO2 Foundation for Lung Cancer in a study — together with Vanderbilt University Medical Center and Augusta University — to determine how to improve participation from Black communities in lung cancer clinical trials.

The study, Studying Trial Determinants of Success, or STRIDE funded by grants awarded to GO2 Foundation from Genentech and Bristol Myers Squibb, will help researchers better understand barriers to clinical trial participation among African American patients in Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia. Researchers will also develop programs to increase clinical trial participation among African American patients.

While participation in clinical trials by all cancer

patients in the United States is extremely low, at about 8 percent, that rate is even lower among racial and ethnic minority groups. African Americans make up about 6 percent of participants in clinical trials.

“Diverse representation in clinical trials is essential to find treatments that are effective for all populations, including people from various racial, ethnic and geographic backgrounds,” said Monica Baskin, Ph.D., professor in the UAB Division of Preventive Medicine and associate director for the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Office of Community Outreach and Engagement.

“Good representation in trials also allows researchers to better understand patterns of difference in health and sickness based

on backgrounds and behaviors that may provide more effective treatment and/or prevention.”

The Cancer Center will receive \$350,000 to support its work on the STRIDES project. The grant from Genentech comes from its Health Equity Innovation Fund, which aims to reduce disparities in health care access, quality and outcomes. Nearly 380 institutions and organizations applied for funding support.

The rate of lung cancer in African American men is about 30 percent higher than in white men. Both African American men and women are more likely to develop and die from lung cancer than any other racial group.

“Increasing the rate of minority participation in cancer clinical trials

is a pressing need and requires a multipronged approach to accomplish this task,” said Soumya J. Niranjana, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UAB Department of Health Services Administration and STRIDES co-investigator.

The project will survey and interview a range of people who play a role in the clinical trial process, from patients to research staff and doctors, to find out what contributes to decreased clinical trial participation among African American patients in these areas.

The second phase of the project will use those lessons learned to select and pilot different evidence-based initiatives to increase the participation of African American patients in clinical trials.

Office of Community Outreach & Engagement  
1824 6th Avenue South  
WTI Suite 102  
Birmingham, AL 35233

## HEALTH ADVOCATES 'GO BLUE' FOR COLORECTAL AWARENESS IN MARCH



**Pauline King**, a Community Health Advisor in Dallas County, represented the cause of colorectal cancer awareness as she stood at the foot of the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.



**Dr. Daniel I Chu**, a colorectal surgeon and scientist at the O'Neal Cancer Center shows his support for the cause.



**Kaycee Hair**, Administrative Assistant in the Division of Gastrointestinal Surgery, goes all out in blue to mark the day and honor the cause.