

Community Connections



KEEPING OUR COMMUNITIES CONNECTED AND ENGAGED

From The Director's Desk

Issue 8, November 2020

LUNG CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

November is one of my favorite months of the year. It is a time we reflect on the year behind us and give thanks for the good that has resulted. Even with the current challenges that we face, there is still much for which to be grateful. As a team, we have continued to join together to achieve the mission of our office. I would like to thank all our CHAs, coordinators, team members and community partners for your continued support, dedication and collaboration as we band together during these unprecedented times. Whether it be in person or virtually, we are all here each and every day, providing essential cancer information that saves lives and enhances the quality of life for members of our communities. November is also important as it is Lung Cancer Awareness Month. Our office remains at the forefront of



lung cancer education and screening through the ALCASE program. During this pandemic, many of you have extended the limits of your creativity to continue to reach those who need to know the facts about lung cancer and the availability of screening. In this month's newsletter, we highlight our work with ALCASE. Additionally, we spotlight Laronica L. Conway, an oncology research coordinator at the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center and a partner in our community

engagement. As you will read, helping patients access the best services possible is both a personal and professional calling for her.

Also, remember to take care of yourselves this flu season. Take a moment to get a flu vaccine. There's no better time than now to take control of your own health.

Happy Thanksgiving to all.
Thanks,

– Claudia

O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CENTER
UAB THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

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November Health Awareness

Challenge yourself. See how many of these health terms
you can unscramble.

1. EDTIBSAE
2. LWO SDEO TC
3. NISLNIU
4. PYTE EON
5. YIESOTB
6. ULNG ANCECR
7. BODOL RSAGU
8. EODNSC NHDA ESMKO
9. YAMFIL TIHYSRO
10. OPST KGNMISO

ANSWERS
1. Diabetes 2. Low Dose CT 3. Insulin 4. Type One 5. Obesity 6. Lung Cancer
7. Blood Sugar 8. Second Hand Smoke 9. Family History 10. Stop Smoking

THE RESEARCH CORNER

ALCASE: PROGRAM CONTINUES TO FIND, TEST ALABAMIANS AT GREATEST RISK FOR LUNG CANCER

Health advocates throughout the state are continuing efforts to educate Alabamians about the realities of lung cancer, eliminate fear and present options for screening.

Coordinators and community health advisors at the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center remain determined to meet goals of the Alabama Lung Cancer Awareness Screening and Education (ALCASE) program, to address disparities in lung cancer in underserved communities. Work continues, even with social distancing measures in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ALCASE, a partnership with the GO2 Foundation, uses the community health advisor model to persuade smokers and former smokers in Jefferson, Macon, Choctaw, Greene, Hale, Sumter and Dallas Counties to seek screening for lung cancer.

The teams are encouraging people to agree to screenings, which are low dose CT scans. The process takes about 15 minutes.

"It's important because lung cancer doesn't get the awareness that other cancers get, but it is the number one cause of cancer death," said Tara Bowman, program manager in the Office of Community Outreach & Engagement at Cancer Center.

"Screening starts at the age of 55 for current or



Kathy Levy, project manager for ALCASE, greets with the Civil Air Patrol as she shares information about the lung cancer screenings. (Photo: Choctaw Sun-Advocate)

former smokers. We're using the CHAs to raise awareness about risks and screenings."

While lung cancer screening provides the greatest chance for finding and treating the disease early, only 4 percent of people nationally are screened each year.

"We are just open and candid with them. The earlier you find out, the better your survival will be. We have a candid conversation and there are no dumb questions," Bowman said.

The pandemic has compounded the challenge of reaching people. Yet work continues, using modified and socially distanced methods. Kathy Levy leverages partnerships throughout the state to continue to reach people.

"I've partnered with

COVID-19 screening sites, so whenever they have screenings, we go and pass out information to the people who are coming to the line to be screened," said Levy project manager for ALCASE.

In August, Levy was on site when the Civil Air Patrol and the West Central Alabama Area Health Education Centers conducted COVID-19 testing and took the kits to Birmingham by helicopter for rapid processing. For Levy, the COVID-19 event provided an opportunity to deliver ALCASE lung cancer information to her health-conscious neighbors in Choctaw County.

"You have to take every opportunity that you have right now," she said.

Levy recalls several examples of working with

smokers and former smokers who were fearful of lung cancer. ALCASE empowered them with greater awareness and access to resources. Early detection is essential, she said.

"This is actually the first time that we've been out here in the street with outreach to talk about lung cancer," Levy said of ALCASE. "Just because you have lung cancer doesn't mean you're going to die. But by us talking to them they know that they need to get checked early, and they can live a normal life with medication and treatment."

Smokers seeking ways to stop may call 1-800-QUIT NOW. A partnership with the Alabama Department of Public Health, the hotline offers a series of short help sessions and resources.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

FROM THE SEC TO UAB: LARONICA CONWAY BRINGS GRIDIRON LOGISTICS AND ZEAL TO CANCER PATIENT ADVOCACY AND CARE

Throughout her career, Laronica Conway has dedicated herself to the mission of delivering victories, whether inside the nation's largest roaring arenas and stadiums or inside the hushed private waiting areas of a medical center.

Conway is a research study coordinator at the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center. Her role includes serving as a liaison between patients and physicians.

"Before COVID I would meet with the patients before their doctors' visits. I would find out more from them than the doctors would," Conway said with a laugh. "You could not have told me when I was working the Final Four and going to the SEC Championship that I would be doing this."

Conway's path to UAB is an unlikely one.

"There was a purpose and a reason behind all of it," she said. Conway moved to Birmingham in 2003 to become Southeastern Conference assistant commissioner for championships and sports administration. Her position put her in the middle of storied college rivalries, a dream for any sports fan.

Her mother, Lillie Conway, sat in the stands as her daughter helped to direct the action. The senior Conway even shared some moments with then-SEC Commissioner Mike Slive.

Games aside, it was a medical crisis presented a real-life challenge for Conway. Her mother was diagnosed with stage 4 non-small cell lung cancer in

2008.

By the time the cancer had spread to her mother's brain in 2011, Conway knew it was time to make a change from the hustle of sports management. She moved back to her hometown in Louisiana to help care for her mother.

"I got to the point where my soul needed something else," she explained.

Her mother's death in 2012 solidified Conway's new purpose. She began volunteering and learning more about cancer, particularly lung cancer.

She took to her blog to write about her loss, just a month after her mother's death.

"Now, it's up to me to continue the legacy. I hope to be able to assist with research or contribute what I've learned in this short time. Mom played her part. Now it's time for me to play mine," Conway wrote. "I had become comfortable in my career in college athletics, but was I making an impact? Was I doing what God had intended for me to do?"

Conway continued her advocacy work as a co-founder of Lung Cancer Social Media Chat (#LCSM). The group was created to provide lung cancer education and support.

Conway in 2017 finally traded in her lanyard and VIP passes for a set of hospital scrubs with her current position at UAB.

"My whole view of life changed after my mom died. I didn't know what the path looked like. All I knew is I wanted to help people who



Laronica Conway and her mother, Lillie Conway

couldn't help themselves," Conway said.

Conway is also active locally with the American Lung Association, and became the first person to represent the state of Alabama at the first ALA's Lung Force event. She was named a Lung Force Hero for Alabama and spoke to members of Congress in Washington in 2016.

"I cried the first night I got to town," Conway recalled. "A trip to ask for more funding for lung cancer? Who would have thought? I went again in 2018 and again was blown away."

Like other families affected by cancer, Conway requires no written talking points to explain the pain of the disease. Conway remains passionate about lung cancer awareness, education and screening efforts.

"I probably go overboard because I want to know everything about these people," Conway said of her patient advocacy. "I explain things in a way that that get it, because I didn't go to med school. It takes me back

to my mom when she had someone help her understand things."

Conway and her former colleague, Mike Slive, both left the SEC and became advocates for cancer awareness and education. The longtime commissioner would later co-found and lend his name to a foundation dedicated to prostate cancer awareness, research and screening.

Slive continued his prostate cancer awareness work until his death from the disease in 2018. Just as The Mike Slive Foundation for Prostate Cancer Research continues on his behalf, Conway continues her work for lung cancer patients as a tribute to her mother.

"I can't even put into words what my mom would say," Conway said of her mother, a longtime guidance counselor. "Her whole thing in life was to show people that they could do more than they ever imagined. I'm pretty sure she would be proud of me. There is nothing that I can't handle now."

NEWLY TRAINED CHAS COMPLETE WEEKS OF TRAINING, CELEBRATE – FROM A DISTANCE

With certificates presented to smiling faces and poses for photos, several recent celebrations had the usual sights and sounds of a graduation – but with a twist.

Drive-through gradations and socially distanced activities, did not lessen the excitement of health advocates after eight weeks of training on chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Newly trained community health advisors from the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center received their credentials for a new program to improve the health of their communities in Alabama and Mississippi.

For some, the graduation was the first time they actually saw their fellow

CHAs in person, after two months of getting to know them on computer screens and by telephone.

In Alabama, the Chronic Disease and Health Disparities Program will fight health disparities in: Bullock, Calhoun, Madison, Monroe and Talladega, Walker Counties. Six Mississippi counties are included: Yazoo, Bolivar, Granada, Humphreys, Panola and Sunflower.

CHAs will conduct education outreach activities that focus on chronic diseases and ways to prevent or manage them with lifestyle adjustments. CHAs will later develop a gardening program for residents 65 and older.

Coordinators throughout



Mississippi and Alabama have found creative ways to teach their CHAs and create community – even while social distancing, explained Nikki Johnson, program manager for the initiative.

“All of the coordinators

have done a good job of finding unique ways to keep their people actively engaged,” Johnson said. “We’ve been really strategic, but also very innovative in the way that we’ve moved through this.”