

**UAB MEDICINE.**

O'Neal Cancer Center



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DISSEMINATION  
INSTITUTE

# Beyond the Institute

*FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION*

Impact Report & Strategic Framework

Office of Community Outreach & Engagement

# Overview

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The 2025 Community Dissemination Institute (CDI) welcomed over 300 participants to Mobile, Alabama for a powerful time of learning, connection and action.

The theme, “Boots on the Ground,” honored the work that participants carried out in our communities every day. Whether they are community health advisors, caregivers, survivors, researchers or advocates, their voices and experiences shape the future of cancer care and prevention across Alabama and the Mississippi Delta.

At the O’Neal Cancer Center, collaboration remains central to the mission of reducing cancer burden. CDI emphasizes catchment-relevant research, which was informed by local people, focuses on real-world challenges and aims at developing solutions that could be implemented immediately within communities. From early detection to survivorship, the goal is to translate research findings into real action that saves lives.

This year’s CDI also introduced a new format designed to strengthen collaboration and innovation across sectors.

- Plenary sessions connected mental health, HPV prevention and cancer risk reduction to community realities.
- Rotating “Blazing Trails” conversations placed investigators in the same rooms as community members and advocates, which allowed scientific ideas to be refined against practical, local perspectives.
- Breakout sessions on breast and prostate cancer, cooking and nutrition demonstrations and poster and trainee presentations provided opportunities to learn, identify gaps, refine research questions and establish new partnerships.

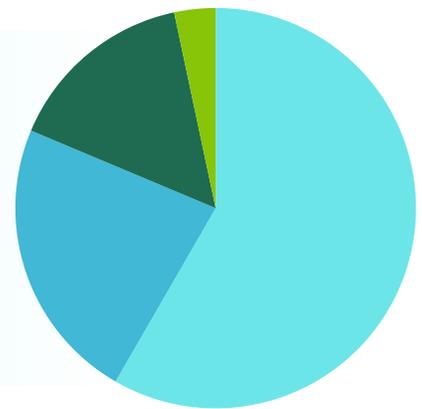
The gathering focused on building trust, sharing knowledge and taking collective steps forward. Together, participants contributed to the O’Neal Cancer Center’s vision of achieving a life without cancer throughout Alabama and beyond.



# Participation Summary

The 2025 Community Dissemination Institute brought together a total of 300 participants, representing diverse community and professional backgrounds.

Participant Category	Number	Percentage
Community Health Advisors (CHAs)	175	59%
Vendors, Staff, Community Advocates & Partners	69	23%
Academia, Researchers & Scientists	46	15%
High School Student Partners	10	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>



## Participation Highlights

Community Health Advisors represented the majority of attendees, which reflects CDI's continued strength in grassroots engagement and peer-led education.

Nearly one quarter of attendees were vendors, staff, and advocates, which illustrates CDI's strong partnerships across health, advocacy and service organizations.

Academic and research professionals contributed scientific insights and helped translate data into actionable community strategies.

High school student partners added an important youth perspective, which underscores CDI's commitment to developing the next generation of health equity leaders.

# Evaluation Summary

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## Overall satisfaction and advocacy

- CDI overall earned 92% satisfied responses:
  - 71 very satisfied
  - 15 somewhat satisfied
  - 7 neutral
- Likelihood to recommend was very high:
  - 101 very likely
  - 5 somewhat likely.

## Standout sessions

- Opening Keynote met expectations for 95% of respondents who attended:
  - Excellent or Very good = 180 of 189
  - Quality and usefulness also scored strongly.
- Tuesday plenaries performed very well.
  - *Is a Clinical Research Study Right for Me*
    - 90% positive on expectations
    - 91% on usefulness
  - *Lassoing Support*
    - 92% positive on expectations
    - 93% on usefulness
  - Kahoot
    - 93% positive on expectations
    - 88% on usefulness
- Monday morning sessions showed high satisfaction.
  - *Wrangling the Mind* reached 97% positive on expectations and 95% on usefulness.
  - *Operation Wipe Out and HPV Prevention* reached 93% positive on expectations and 91% on usefulness.
- Breakouts and demos received strong marks among attendees.
  - *Cooking Demo* reached 93% positive on expectations and 91% on usefulness.
  - *Breast Cancer Breakout and Prostate Cancer Breakout* each exceeded 90% positive among those who attended, with lower attendance for prostate.

## Experience ratings

- **Registration:** 93% satisfied
- **Location and accommodations:** 96% satisfied
- **Organization:** 92% satisfied
- **Variety of topics:** 92% satisfied
- **Exhibitors:** 90% satisfied
- **Break times:** 85% satisfied, noted as an area to improve
- **Meal options:** 79% satisfied, with requests about temperature and lines
- Participation in Morning inspiration and Physical activities varied, with many not attending.

## Theme and environment

- The “Boots on the Ground” theme resonated strongly, with the largest share rating it Excellent.
- Decorations were well received, with most ratings at Excellent or Good.



## What attendees valued most

- Practical, plain-language information they could take back to their communities
- Opportunities to connect with researchers, clinicians, vendors, and peers
- Sessions on clinical research participation, palliative and supportive care, mental health, prostate and breast cancer and the nutrition and cooking demonstrations

## Top requests and opportunities

### Program and content

- Allow more time for questions and discussion, especially in larger blocks
- Additional CHA-led or CHA-centered discussions and skills sharing
- Continued focus on mental health, survivorship, clinical trials, genetics, sleep health and cancer site specifics such as pancreatic, prostate, colon, breast, brain, thyroid, kidney, multiple myeloma, pediatric and sickle cell

## Logistics

- Smoother meal service, warmer food and more dessert
- More and longer breaks, especially on Monday
- Clearer wayfinding to breakouts and access to slides
- Room temperature adjustments for comfort
- Travel support considerations for CHAs and interest in charter buses

## Access and recognition

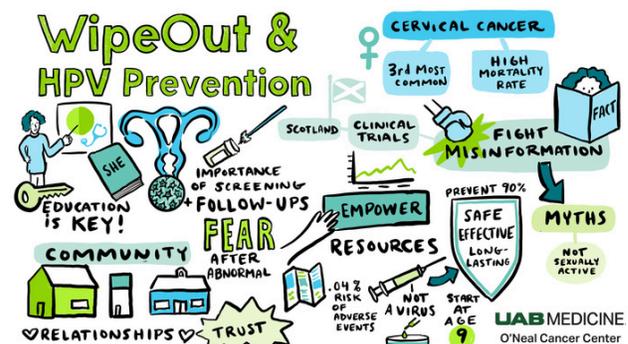
- Explore CEU credits for those needing education hours.
- Improve audio for attendees with hearing loss.
- Include more survivor voices and youth participation.

## Partners to invite

- Public health agencies and payers (NIH, CDC, Alabama Medicaid, Alabama Department of Senior Services), local medical providers, sororities and fraternities with health initiatives and community organizations addressing social determinants of health

## Quick wins for next year

1. Build in short breaks within morning blocks and add clear wayfinding to breakouts
2. Offer a concise slide repository and plain-language takeaways for CHAs after each session
3. Design one or two CHA-led panels that highlight county-level strategies and tools
4. Coordinate meal service flow and temperature checks
5. Explore CEU credit pathways and basic accessibility upgrades for audio



## Breakout Sessions Brief Overview:

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The 2025 Community Dissemination Institute featured four research program breakout sessions that connected scientists and community members in meaningful dialogue about how research becomes real-world impact.

In **Cancer Biology and Immunology**, participants explored how discoveries in cell behavior and immune response can lead to better treatments, asking thoughtful questions about research diversity, precision and access to technology.

The **Experimental Therapeutics** session focused on developing targeted drugs and clinical trials, with community members emphasizing prevention, equitable participation and the need for public advocacy to sustain research funding.

In **Cancer Control and Population Science**, discussions centered on physical activity, financial barriers and mental health, where community voices helped researchers understand how local experiences can strengthen study design and improve long-term outcomes.

The **Neuro-Oncology** session highlighted the importance of early detection, care coordination, and survivorship, as families shared personal experiences that revealed ways to make science more accessible and responsive.

Across all sessions, a clear message emerged: community member questions are not only reflections of lived experience but also catalysts for discovery.

By listening to these questions and working collaboratively to address the challenges they reveal, scientists and communities together can build more effective, inclusive and sustainable solutions to improve health and advance health equity in cancer care.



# Breakout Sessions Overview Breakdown:

## Cancer Biology & Immunology

- Requested clearer explanations of how research “hits the target” and measures success, linking lab discoveries to real-world patient outcomes
- Called for greater inclusion of diverse populations in cancer and immunology research to ensure findings benefit all communities
- Emphasized the need to bridge the digital divide so rural and low-resource areas can access health information and emerging technologies

## Experimental Therapeutics

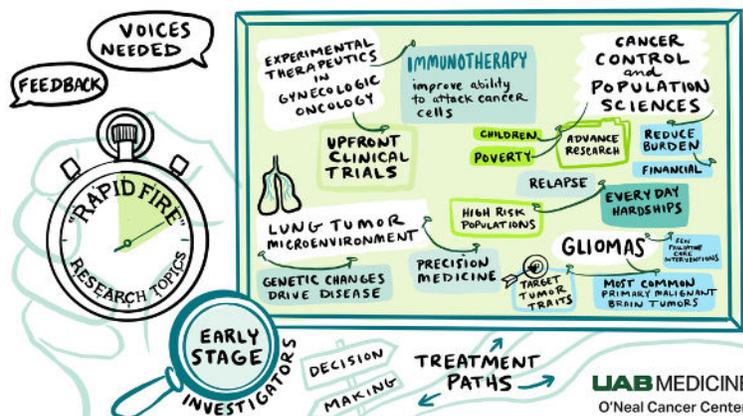
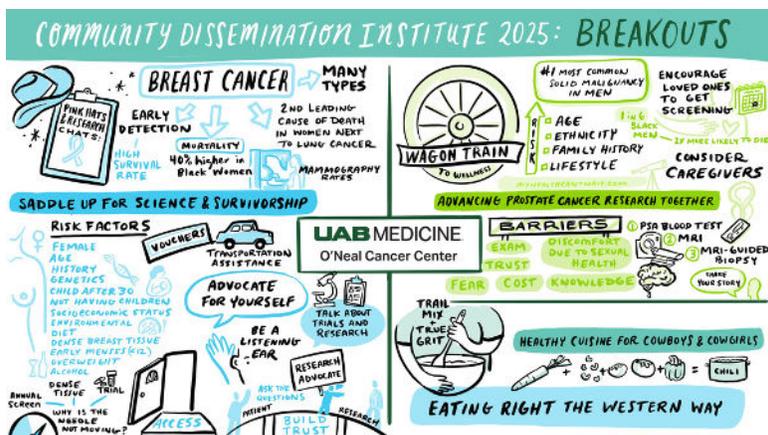
- Asked for more information about how precision medicine and DNA sequencing translate into accessible treatment options
- Sought better understanding of clinical trials; how to enroll, how participants are supported financially and how results are shared
- Expressed concern about the future of research funding and requested guidance on how communities can advocate for continued scientific progress

## Cancer Control & Population Science

- Requested expansion of cancer prevention and survivorship programs into rural and underserved counties across Alabama and Mississippi
- Called for greater attention to financial hardship and mental health needs among cancer patients and survivors
- Encouraged more collaboration with communities to inform study design, ensuring research reflects real-life challenges and local priorities

## Neuro-Oncology

- Participants asked for clearer guidance on when neurological symptoms, like headaches or cognitive changes. These should prompt referral to specialists.
- Wanted more accessible information about brain tumor prognosis, survivorship and treatment options to reduce fear and uncertainty
- Urged improved coordination between community physicians and academic centers to streamline care for patients in rural areas



# Breakout Sessions In-Depth Breakdown:

## Cancer Biology & Immunology Breakout Session: Thematic Summary

The Cancer Biology and Immunology session at the 2025 CDI offered an open exchange between researchers and community members about how science and community partnership work together to reduce the burden of cancer. Community participants raised thoughtful questions about research effectiveness, diversity in studies, access to information and advances in treatment. Their questions revealed strong interest in learning how laboratory discoveries become real-world improvements in health and how communities can help scientists be more successful in that process.

- Requested clearer explanations of how research “hits the target” and measures success, linking lab discoveries to real-world patient outcomes
- Called for greater inclusion of diverse populations in cancer and immunology research to ensure findings benefit all communities
- Emphasized the need to bridge the digital divide so rural and low-resource areas can access health information and emerging technologies

### **Making Science Understandable and Relevant**

Community members wanted to know how researchers determine if their work is “hitting the target” and what “success” means in the lab. These questions highlight a desire to understand how basic science leads to better treatments and outcomes for patients. Future opportunities include translating complex research findings into clear, community-friendly messages and sharing regular updates about progress from the laboratory to the clinic.

### **Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Research**

Participants asked whether research studies include people from different backgrounds, reflecting awareness that diversity in science leads to more equitable healthcare. Communities can support scientists by helping connect diverse populations to research opportunities and by sharing trusted information about the importance of participation in clinical trials.

### **Improving Access to Technology and Information**

Attendees discussed challenges faced by rural residents and older adults who lack access to reliable internet or smartphones. This exchange reinforced the importance of making cancer education materials available in multiple formats: digital, print and in-person. This ensures everyone can benefit from new knowledge and research advances.

## Learning About Progress in Cancer Treatment

Community members were eager to hear about improvements in treating blood cancers, especially leukemia, and to understand the link between conditions like sickle cell anemia and cancer. Researchers shared encouraging news on topics such as childhood leukemia survival rates now exceed 85%, and they explained that while sickle cell anemia increases risk for some blood disorders, it does not always lead to cancer. Continued communication about treatment advances can help build hope and awareness across communities.

## Clarifying Complex Diseases

When attendees asked about multiple myeloma and how it differs from sickle cell anemia, scientists provided clear explanations of how cancers of the blood and bone marrow develop. These conversations show that communities are eager for more education on how diseases work and how to prevent or detect them early.

## Moving Forward Together

This session demonstrated the power of two-way learning. Scientists gained valuable insight into the questions and priorities of the communities they serve, and community members gained a clearer understanding of how research progresses and why their involvement matters. Together, they identified shared goals through more inclusive research, clearer communication and better access to information. This will help reduce the cancer burden across Alabama and Mississippi.

## Experimental Therapeutics Breakout Session: Thematic Summary

The Experimental Therapeutics session at the 2025 CDI connected scientists developing next-generation cancer treatments with community members eager to understand how research discoveries lead to better care. The discussion focused on tumor sequencing, drug design, leukemia research and clinical trials — and community questions reflected deep curiosity about prevention, screening, innovation and the stability of the nation's research system. Through this dialogue, participants identified opportunities for scientists and communities to work hand in hand to ensure that discoveries in the lab translate into longer, healthier lives for all.

- Asked for more information about how precision medicine and DNA sequencing translate into accessible treatment options
- Sought better understanding of clinical trials: how to enroll, how participants are supported financially, and how results are shared
- Expressed concern about the future of research funding and requested guidance on how communities can advocate for continued scientific progress

## **From Discovery to Detection: Research on Biomarkers and DNA Sequencing**

Community members asked whether a proinflammatory factor found in the spinal fluid of children with leukemia is already being tested and when such testing would be done. Scientists explained that this work was still under study but could lead to new tools for detecting when cancer spreads to the brain. These questions highlighted public interest in how scientific discoveries move from research to real-world use and a desire for early detection methods that can save lives.

**Future focus:** Partnering with community health educators to explain how biomarkers and DNA sequencing guide diagnosis, treatment, and prevention

## **Prevention, Screening, and Awareness**

Several questions, such as “Are there preventive methods for leukemia?” and “Is there a recommended screening age?” showed strong interest in what individuals can do to stay healthy and detect cancer early. Researchers explained that, unlike breast or colon cancer, leukemia currently has no formal screening test, but healthy lifestyles and regular blood work can help identify issues sooner.

**Future focus:** Using CHA networks and Regional Wellness Days to share clear, actionable messages about cancer risk, prevention and the importance of routine health checks

## **Understanding Tumors Beyond DNA**

Community members wanted to know if scientists look only at genetics when identifying tumors or if they also consider physical or environmental factors. This question underscored growing awareness that cancer is shaped by both biology and lived environment, including diet, stress, and pollution.

**Future focus:** Developing community-friendly education that explains how genetics, environment and lifestyle interact in cancer development and how local research in Alabama is addressing these factors

## **Making Cancer Screening More Comfortable and Accessible**

The question, “Are there any new tools for pelvic exams?” sparked discussion about discomfort and embarrassment that often deter women from getting screened for cervical cancer. Scientists shared that self-sampling for HPV is an emerging option that allows women to collect samples privately, though some exams remain essential for full health assessments.

**Future focus:** Collaborating with community partners to normalize cancer screening conversations, expand access to self-sampling and provide both digital and printed information that respects privacy and cultural sensitivity

## Safeguarding the Future of Research

Community members also raised concerns about how political changes and potential federal cutbacks, such as the dismantling of the CDC, might affect ongoing research. Scientists acknowledged these uncertainties but emphasized continued support from universities, the NIH and other partners. These questions reflected a community that saw research as a public good and recognized that consistent funding and advocacy are vital to sustaining progress.

**Future focus:** Strengthening community advocacy for science and health funding through OCOE networks and communications

## Moving Forward Together

This session illustrated the power of two-way communication. Community members brought insightful questions about prevention, access and the future of cancer science, while researchers provided transparent answers about where discoveries stood at the time. Together, they identified shared priorities such as more education about precision medicine, improved access to comfortable and culturally sensitive screening and advocacy for sustained research support. The exchange embodied the mission of the Office of Community Outreach & Engagement: reducing the cancer burden across Alabama and Mississippi through evidence, education and empowerment, ensuring that every discovery in experimental therapeutics brings hope and healing closer to home.

## Cancer Control & Population Science Breakout: Thematic Summary

The Cancer Control & Population Science (CCPS) breakout session at the 2025 Community Dissemination Institute underscored the importance of connecting research to real community experiences. Led by Nashera Brown, PhD, Courtney Williams, DrPH and Maria Pesu, PhD with facilitation by Floretta James Dortch, PhD. The discussion centered on physical activity, financial hardship and mental health among cancer survivors.

Community members' questions about rural outreach, financial stipends, research timelines and survivor support reflected a deep interest in helping science become stronger, more equitable and more relevant. Their curiosity and lived expertise offered valuable guidance on how research can better reflect the realities of life in Alabama and neighboring communities.

- Requested expansion of cancer prevention and survivorship programs into rural and underserved counties across Alabama and Mississippi
- Called for greater attention to financial hardship and mental health needs among cancer patients and survivors
- Encouraged more collaboration with communities to inform study design, ensuring research reflects real-life challenges and local priorities

## Expanding Access and Inclusion

When participants asked whether research programs could reach rural counties such as Wood County or extend into Mississippi, they highlighted an essential scientific opportunity: broader recruitment leads to better data. Including rural and under-resourced communities ensures findings apply to more people and strengthens the validity of population-based research. **Community insight that benefits science:** Residents can help researchers locate study sites, identify trusted community spaces and improve recruitment strategies that reflect regional diversity.

## Reducing Financial Barriers to Strengthen Study Retention

Questions about how stipends are funded and managed revealed awareness that financial strain can affect whether participants stay enrolled in research. By raising these points, community members helped spotlight a barrier that influences data completeness and trial outcomes. **Community insight that benefits science:** Feedback on the economic realities of patients can inform more sustainable study budgets, improve retention rates and lead to policy recommendations that make trials more accessible.

## Promoting Physical Activity Research That Fits Real Life

Nashera Brown, PhD's "activity snacks" approach, which used short bouts of movement throughout the day, resonated with attendees, especially from rural areas. Their enthusiasm showed researchers how adapting interventions to everyday life increases participation and accuracy in measuring behavior change. **Community insight that benefits science:** By sharing how local environments influence physical activity, communities can guide scientists in designing interventions that are culturally and logistically feasible, improving study adherence and outcome validity.

## Integrating Mental Health to Enhance Study Relevance

When participants asked about mental health programs for survivors, they pointed out an area that science often overlooks. Including psychosocial dimensions in research not only benefits patients but also yields richer, multidimensional data. **Community insight that benefits science:** Advocating for emotional wellness measures helps researchers capture the full impact of cancer on quality of life and informs more holistic, evidence-based survivorship models.



## Sustaining Research Through Ongoing Community Partnership

Questions about how long studies last and what happens after they end signaled an interest in continuity. Community engagement over time strengthens longitudinal research and helps ensure findings translate into durable programs. **Community insight that benefits science:** Ongoing relationships allow scientists to track real-world outcomes, refine interventions and co-create future studies grounded in trust and shared purpose.

## Moving Forward Together

This session demonstrated that when communities are engaged as collaborators, not just participants, science itself improves. Their questions and perspectives revealed opportunities to refine study design, enhance data quality and extend impact. By weaving community wisdom into every phase of research, from concept to dissemination, the O'Neal Cancer Center and its partners can advance science that is more inclusive, more accurate and more transformative. Together, we move closer to OCOE's mission of reducing the cancer burden through evidence, education and empowerment, proving that science thrives when community voices lead alongside it.

## Neuro-Oncology Breakout Session: Thematic Summary

The Neuro-Oncology breakout session at the 2025 Community Dissemination Institute created an important bridge between neuroscience research and community experience. Led by UAB experts in brain tumor care and research, the session explored how scientific discovery, clinical innovation and compassionate outreach intersect to improve the lives of Alabamians facing brain cancer.

Community members' questions revealed not only concern for loved ones but also a desire to help scientists and clinicians improve communication, coordination and trust. Their voices reflected a shared goal to ensure that scientific progress reaches every patient in need.

- Participants asked for clearer guidance on when neurological symptoms, like headaches or cognitive changes. These should prompt referral to specialists.
- Wanted more accessible information about brain tumor prognosis, survivorship and treatment options to reduce fear and uncertainty
- Urged improved coordination between community physicians and academic centers to streamline care for patients in rural areas

### Improving Care Coordination and Awareness

A community member asked how to help her brother, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor and experiencing headaches and cognitive changes: “These headaches, do they affect his way of thinking? ... What can we do to help him realize he needs more than just a regular doctor?”

This heartfelt question illuminated a key challenge: many families struggle to recognize when symptoms require specialized care. Researchers and clinicians emphasized that early referral to neuro-oncology specialists is critical for accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. - **Community insight that benefits science:** By sharing these real-world barriers, community members help scientists and providers identify gaps in referral pathways and design studies that improve coordination between local clinics and academic centers like UAB.

### Addressing Questions of Prognosis and Survivorship

Another attendee asked about survivorship and whether a brain tumor diagnosis is “a death sentence.” Researchers explained that outcomes vary widely based on tumor type, location, and treatment, noting that many benign tumors can be cured through surgery, while others require ongoing therapy. - **Community insight that benefits science:** These questions encourage researchers to focus on survivorship science, collecting data on recovery, cognition and quality of life to help patients and families better understand what to expect beyond treatment.

### Expanding Reach and Access to Specialized Care

Speakers discussed the challenges of reaching patients in rural Alabama who may not know where to seek expert evaluation for neurological symptoms. Participants expressed interest in helping share accurate information through churches, local media and community networks. - **Community insight that benefits science:** Community partnerships can help researchers test outreach strategies, measure their effectiveness in improving early detection and refine models for rural access to neuro-oncology care.

### Combating Misinformation and Building Trust

Questions about symptoms and prognosis also pointed to widespread misconceptions about brain tumors, particularly confusion between common headaches and cancer-related symptoms. Researchers noted the importance of trustworthy, culturally appropriate communication about when to seek care. - **Community insight that benefits science:** By co-creating educational messages, communities help researchers evaluate which communication tools improve health literacy and reduce diagnostic delays.

## Guiding Research Toward Real-World Impact

The conversation reinforced that progress in brain tumor treatment requires more than laboratory innovation; it depends on understanding patient journeys and community realities. From symptom recognition to long-term recovery, each question offered scientists valuable insight into the human side of their work. - **Community insight that benefits science:** Lived experiences shared in sessions like this can inform research design, identify new study outcomes such as cognitive function and caregiver burden, and guide funding priorities for survivorship and access studies.

## Moving Forward Together

This session demonstrated the heart of OCOE's mission: science and community advancing together. Community members' questions about symptoms, care coordination and prognosis revealed opportunities for scientists to improve outreach, refine research priorities and strengthen the bridge between discovery and care.

When researchers listen to lived experiences and communities share their realities, both sides benefit. Science becomes more responsive, and patients gain pathways to hope, healing and better outcomes.

Together, UAB's Neuro-Oncology team and Alabama's communities are advancing toward a future where every discovery is grounded in evidence, education and empowerment.

## Summation

The 2025 Community Dissemination Institute strengthened connections between science and community through interactive sessions on mental health, prevention, equity and survivorship. Participants' insightful questions shaped research priorities and inspired collaboration between community members and scientists. Key takeaways included the importance of accessible communication, culturally relevant education and sustained advocacy for health equity. Evaluations reflected high satisfaction, strong engagement and appreciation for the event's organization and inclusivity. The Institute reaffirmed its mission to advance cancer prevention and care across Alabama and the Mississippi Delta through evidence, education and empowerment, demonstrating that lasting progress grows from community-driven partnerships. We look forward to what the future holds for the Office of Community Outreach & Engagement, its shareholders, its partners and the community.

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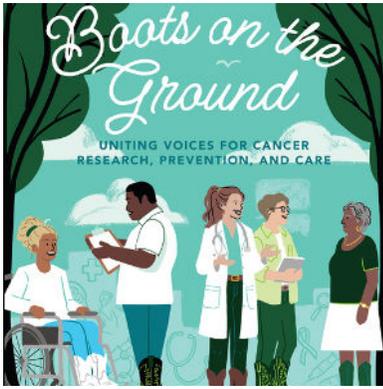
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