

# The Komen Connection

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## World Cancer Day 2019: 'I Am And I Will'

Community, Dollars Making A Difference, Global

By: Mary Woods

### □ ***Empowering Underserved Women In Panama***

Every year, on February 4, passionate individuals and communities around the world raise their collective voice, take personal action and show support for a healthier, brighter future for all.

World Cancer Day raises awareness and education of the disease that claims the lives of 9.6 million people each year and impacts the global economy by \$1.16 trillion.

In Latin America, where breast cancer is the most common cause of cancer-related deaths among women, Komen has been making inroads through an integrated, intercultural approach.

"The region is characterized by huge geographic and socio-economic disparities related to access to breast cancer education, early detection, diagnosis and treatment," says Komen's Director of Global Programs Anna Cabanes, Ph.D., MPH.



Since 2011, with the help of a grant from the Caterpillar Foundation, Komen, in partnership with a host of others including the Breast Health Global Initiative, ministries of health and the Pan American Health Organization, is improving the odds for women battling the disease, especially among rural, indigenous communities where the greatest burden lies with limited resources to quality breast health.

### **Filling the gaps**

One of the countries of focus is Panama. Concentrating on Panama City, Komen identified health care system deficiencies and community-level disparities including lack of breast cancer information, awareness and social support networks.

“To address these gaps, Komen has implemented strategic activities that include a grant program to fund interventions to increase breast cancer education,” explains Cabanes. “We are trying to reduce barriers that limit access to breast health and cancer care as well as provide a quality of care program geared to health care providers of the public sector.”

Collaborating with the civil society group, Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indigenas de Panama (CONAMUIP), the Komen team has implemented projects that focus on the education of indigenous women from Cativa in Colon and Nargana.

Breast cancer education and early-detection messages and videos provide reliable, evidence-based and culturally appropriate information about the importance of early detection.

“The project seeks ultimately to empower underserved women to be proactive and knowledgeable on how to communicate with health professionals about their breast health,” explains Cabanes.

### **Empowering women to take action**

“Finding time for your breasts” (*Saca el tiempo para tus mamas*) is just one national media campaign organized by FundAyuda to promote breast self-awareness and early detection of breast cancer. By delivering strong messages, FundAyuda seeks to alert women to the importance of taking preventive action year-round.

Leveraging the Panamanian government’s initiative to reduce saturation of hospitals and clinics in October (breast cancer awareness month), FundAyuda’s messaging encourages women to get screened during their birthday month, complementing their regular visit to the doctor. Screening services are provided to women at discounted rates for individuals who commit to getting screened.



### **A safe haven**

Nonprofit Hostel Fundación Casita de Mausí is stepping in to provide temporary shelter to uninsured cancer patients with low economic resources living in communities outside of Panama City. Casita arranges transportation and scheduling

of services at Panama's National Cancer Institute, while offering a clean bed, nutritional meals and educational sessions on breast cancer. Casita guests also have the opportunity to be accompanied by a family member or friend.

### **Care at all levels**

Based on recommendations from a study in 2013 of four rural provinces and indigenous communities in Panama, Cabanes and team created actionable interventions that inspired the government and civil society to collectively take action to improve access to cancer treatment and support services.

"Delays in diagnosis aren't exclusively due to a woman not seeking care in a timely manner, but also a result of health care providers not recognizing the signs and symptoms of breast cancer or breast cancer recurrence, and not referring women in a timely manner" she explains.

Komen's global program efforts ensure that health care providers delivering services at all levels of the continuum of care (screening, diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship) are equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge to address the needs of breast cancer patients in their local communities.

### **Expanding provider education**

The Virtual Campus of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is also a vital platform for a country-wide capacity building effort targeting health care providers in the public sector. Guided by the Ministry of Health and the national cancer plan, workgroups with health care providers document referral pathways for patients with breast cancer, as an impetus for addressing gaps along each continuum.

The curriculum offers a standardized continuing education opportunity for providers who may not have had prior education on breast cancer and will be able to deliver better quality care for the country's most vulnerable communities as well as indigenous groups. Trainings are delivered through in-person meetings and web-based trainings.

### **The work ahead**

Leading up to World Cancer Day, Cabanes spent a week as part of a training program in Panama filled with activities geared to improve the quality of breast care in the country's public health system. Working collaboratively with a platform of many stakeholders she can't help but reflect on the work that has been done to improve the lives of so many.

"I am a breast cancer advocate and I will work so where a woman lives doesn't determine whether she lives."

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