

Advocates Ask for Transparency about Wisconsin Well Woman Program Reorganization

A team of advocates from the Wisconsin Breast Cancer Coalition (WBCC) asked for information about whether the WI Well Woman Program's (WWWP) new structure is working for women during the WBCC's State Advocacy Day yesterday at the Capitol in Madison. Advocates spoke with about 31 legislators or legislative aides during the day about this issue and other policies that the WBCC believes are important to the breast cancer community.

"Our top priority this year is ensuring that lower income women have access to screening and treatment," said Executive Director Sandra Gines. "Our concern has grown since we learned about the downscaling of the Well Woman Program, which went into effect last July. We haven't been able to get information from the Department of Health Services about how the reduction in coordinators and providers is affecting the women of Wisconsin, but our own surveys show that things are going in the wrong direction."

The new model replaces 72 local service coordinators (at least one in each county, typically in a county health department) with 14 regional service coordinators. Some coordinators are now responsible for up to 8 -10 counties. The provider network shrank from more than 1000 providers statewide to approximately 460, due to a new Request for Applications process required to be accepted as a WWWP provider. The downscaling makes it necessary for some women to travel up to 50 miles one way for screening, which is difficult for many, especially because of work hours lost, transportation issues, and needing childcare to make the trip.

Two informal surveys conducted by the WBCC of WWWP coordinators indicate that there has been a sharp reduction in the number of women served by the program and new obstacles to screening and treatment, such as travel distance and continuity of care. WBCC has opposed the reorganization, which was designed and implemented by the Department of Health Services, since it was first proposed in 2014.

"Our objective now is to make sure that we don't lose ground with this program," said Gines. "It's primary purpose is to increase breast and cervical cancer screening rates, and DHS needs to explain what is going on if it isn't doing this. DHS needs to figure out if the women who need this service, who can't qualify for insurance or don't have other screening options, if these women are enrolling. It isn't a financial issue, because funding has remained level for the program. Basically, we are asking, was this restructuring justified in terms of increased screenings and, ultimately, lives being saved?"

Other Policy Priorities for the WBCC include:

- urging lawmakers to accept Medicaid Expansion funding, again to ensure that lower income women with breast cancer get the treatment they need;
- supporting legislation like the "Get Youth Moving" bill, which will help reduce obesity rates among young girls and in that way reduce the risk of breast cancer in later life;
- urging that more funding be directed to the seriously underfunded Wisconsin Cancer Reporting System.

"We really enjoyed our conversations at the Capitol this year," said Gines. "Since the WBCC doesn't have specific legislation we are pushing at this time, the meetings were more about educating the people we met with about some of the issues we're watching. The pace at the Capitol seemed pretty relaxed and legislators and their staffs were very generous with their time. And, it's always great when we talk to someone who says, 'I agree!'"

Gines said the WBCC's Policy Committee, which runs the event, is very experienced and made the day educational for participants and politicians alike. The event features training for and mentoring by experienced advocates. WBCC advocates are volunteers who have an interest in breast cancer issues and understand that policy is something that affects everyone, no matter what their particular experience is with the disease.

Dana Johnson, who has volunteered with the WBCC for several years, said, "Today was empowering, and a lot was accomplished with both parties. Special acknowledgment to Dawn [Anderson], who has become like a WBCC mentor to me over the years." Anderson, a WBCC Policy Committee member, retired from the position of Executive Director of the WBCC last November.