



States play part in improving breast cancer detection, research

by Kathryn Schneider
for Stateline Midwest

Many Midwestern states are stepping up efforts to fight breast cancer, coming up with new ways to increase awareness about the disease and raise research funding. According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death of women ages 40 to 55 in the United States. About 2 million women nationwide are currently battling the disease, and 40,000 will die from the illness this year.

But experts say the prognosis is improving for many women, thanks in part to a greater use of cancer screening programs. Early detection of the disease can give women up to a 96 percent chance of survival.

“The most important thing is to encourage women to do testing,” says Illinois Sen. Carol Ronen, a Democrat from Chicago who is a breast cancer survivor. “Early detection saves lives.”

Under legislation proposed in her state this year, Illinois would create additional funding for breast cancer research and awareness through a new state lottery program, which is being called the “Ticket for the Cure” by its sponsors. The program would raise \$3 million a year for breast cancer awareness and treatment. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, about 2,200 women in the state die from breast cancer each year.

“This is an issue that touches so many families,” says Sen. James DeLeo, a Democrat from Chicago and co-sponsor of the Ticket for the Cure measure. “This ticket will raise money that will go to fine research and very important awareness programs.” DeLeo’s mother died from breast cancer at the age of 52, and he has been an advocate of several women’s health issues during his career.

Money from the lottery would be issued in the form of grants under the cooperation of a new board of professionals and the Illinois Health Department. In addition to providing research dollars, supporters say proceeds from the lottery also would be used to raise understanding about the disease. The state would especially focus on increasing the proportion of breast cancer cases that are diagnosed at the early stages. Currently, only about 9 percent are detected at the most curable stage.

If the bill is enacted, Illinois would become the

first U.S. state to institute a lottery game in which all net proceeds are dedicated to breast cancer research and awareness. In February, the bill was being debated in the Senate, and DeLeo says he expects the bipartisan effort to pass.

Testing targets

Illinois already gives residents the option of donating research funds when filing their state income taxes. The Penny Seaverns Breast and Cervical Cancer Research Fund provides grants for research in areas related to early detection and treatment. Named for former state Sen. Penny Seaverns, who died from breast cancer in 1998, the fund raises as much as \$75,000 per year.

All Midwestern states have programs that seek to increase testing among low-income women. Many of these initiatives are made possible through grants from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Illinois Department of Public Health says it has the largest women’s health office in the country, allowing it to be one of the nation’s most active states in terms of breast cancer awareness.

The Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program (IBCCP) provides crucial early detection tools for uninsured and underinsured women in the state. Under this initiative, the Office of

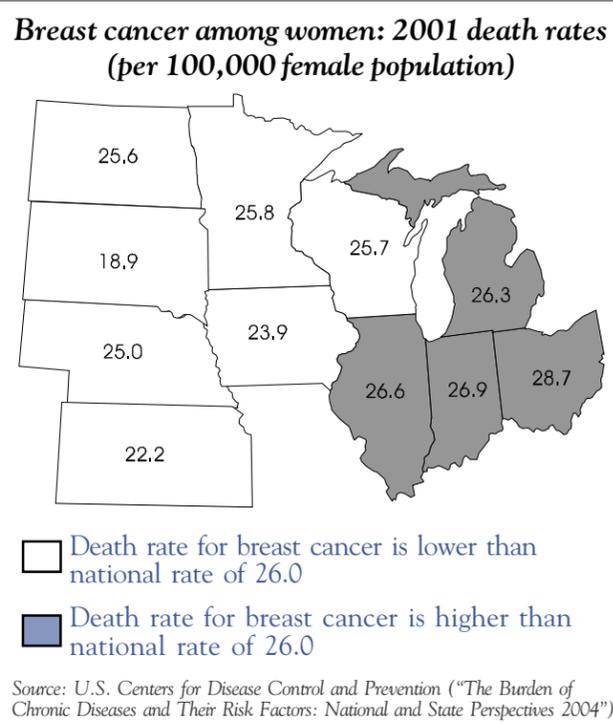
Women’s Health contracts with health care providers to offer free mammograms and other testing for eligible women between the ages of 35 and 64. Funded in part by a \$2 million state grant, the IBCCP has served 35,000 women in its 10-year history.

“This is a critical program,” Illinois deputy director of women’s health Sharon Green says. “This is really one of those safety net programs that has been highly successful.”

The 20,000 women currently enrolled are followed closely and reminded of yearly tests. As the result of passage of the U.S. Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Act in 2000, which

enhanced matching funds to states, women with abnormal testing results are eligible for Medicaid benefits that provide further evaluation and cancer treatment. So far, 600 IBCCP participants have been diagnosed with cancer and treated.

“What could we have done for these women before IBCCP?” Green says. “Without this program, they would have nothing.”



The office also oversees an extensive outreach and education campaign. Stand Against Cancer is a state-funded, community-based program that advocates early cancer screening among targeted minority populations. Marketing campaigns and promotional materials aim to bring women into local clinics for Pap smears, mammograms and breast exams.

The Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services’ Well Woman program has also worked to raise breast cancer awareness among that state’s minority populations, program director Gale Johnson says. For all women who lack insurance or meet certain income requirements, the program offers free screenings and provides a network of local coordinating agencies, which refer eligible women to more than 1,000 health care providers.

“These women haven’t had access in the past [to health care],” Johnson says. “We are their only link to the health care system.”

Recent outreach initiatives in Wisconsin have highlighted the Southeast Asian, Hispanic, African-American and Native American communities, urging women in these “priority populations” to receive cancer screenings. Another difficult challenge, Johnson says, is reaching rural populations throughout the state.

“We know that no one message reaches every woman,” she adds. As a result, the Well Woman program uses a variety of strategies — advertising in print media, on television, on the radio, at health fairs and in clinics — to get its message across. Johnson says she’s seen a dramatic rise in the number of low-income women seeking out cancer screenings in the past few years.

“It has been beneficial to try to focus outreach on specific areas of the population,” Johnson says. “Teaching about breast cancer is so important.”



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