



MISSISSIPPI

Seniors Tackling Cancer

Today we talk more often of “cancer survivors” than “cancer victims.” Much progress has been made in cancer prevention and early detection, and better treatment and care for those affected by the disease. Nonetheless, more than 13,000 Mississippians are likely to be diagnosed with cancer in 2012. Though we rank 25th of states in cancer incidence, our cancer death rate, at third, is among the highest in the nation.

Winston County, Mississippi, having the fourth-highest cancer death rate in the state, is committed to finding local solutions to help fight cancer.

The Mississippi State University Extension Service developed the Seniors Tackling Cancer project to help communities find ways to prevent or detect cancer early, and improve survivors’ quality of life. The effort is supported by the Mississippi State Department of Health’s Comprehensive Cancer Control Program with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As part of this effort, forums were held to involve the community in identifying current resources and challenges in fighting cancer. The forums used guided questions to help county residents better understand 1) what is currently working in the community, 2) what people would like to see happen, 3) what they are willing to do, 4) what ideas they may have, 5) what they see as obstacles and, 6) what they are going to do.

The forums were conducted using a modified World Café* format, in which a facilitator uses the guided questions to start discussions between six to eight people sitting at a table. Their thoughts were joined with those of people at neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. A diverse group of 32 people attended the forums.

*The World Café. World Café Method. Available at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>.

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Most participants were aged ≥ 50 years, and many were cancer survivors or caretakers. Participants developed a “wish list” of what they would like to see happen in Winston County. Based on this list, three community action groups formed to develop local solutions to reduce cancer’s impact on local residents. The groups have

- Developed a volunteer program to call and visit cancer patients and their caregivers and to give food to those with low incomes.
- Produced a directory of available support services in partnership with another community organization.
- Found ways to make wellness activities more social and increase local participation by advertising wellness-oriented community activities. To kick off this effort, the local newspaper published an article featuring the Seniors Tackling Cancer group’s goals.

In the long term, the success of this project will be measured by the impact of the work of these groups in helping cancer patients and their families, improving their quality of life, and increasing opportunities for and participation in health-improving activities.

Of the 11.7 million people living with cancer in 2007, the largest groups of cancer survivors were:

- *Breast cancer survivors (22%).*
- *Prostate cancer survivors (19%).*
- *Colorectal cancer survivors (10%).*