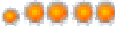


# Cancer targeted

Written by Ayana Jones Tribune Staff Writer Tuesday, 09 February 2010 16:06

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Verna Cox is shown with U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, who has been instrumental in helping citizens struggling with health concerns. —SUBMITTED PHOTO

## Survivor leads fight

As a colon cancer survivor, Verna Cox is on a mission to help others.

Cox, who is the outreach coordinator for the local chapter of the Colon Cancer Alliance, is working to encourage African Americans to be screened for the condition.

“Our platform is to bring awareness to screening,” said Cox, a 60-year old resident of West Philadelphia. “Colon cancer is preventable, treatable and beatable.

I’m on this mission because I believe that if I can help somebody as I travel on, then my living will not have been in vain.”

She wants to get people past the stigma of colon cancer and get them to start talking about the issue.

“I think there is a stigma and an embarrassment attached to colon cancer. People really do not talk about anything to do with the rectum,” Cox said.

Cox’s oncologist, Dr. Edith Mitchell, recommended that she become a patient advocate for the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group, one of the nation’s largest clinical cancer research organizations.

From there she went on to start lobbying for the Colorectal Cancer Coalition, for which she visits Congress to advocate for colon cancer legislation.

Physician experts from the American College of Gastroenterology issued new recommendations in 2005 to health-care providers to begin screening African Americans for colon cancer at age 45. Screenings begin at age 50 for the general population and are conducted every 10 years.

The most preferred screening mechanism is the colonoscopy, in which a thin, lighted tube called a colonoscope is placed in the rectum to view the colon. During that procedure, doctors can find and remove pre-cancerous growths — called polyps — from the colon before they become cancerous. The procedure also enables doctors to find colon cancer in its earlier stages.

Cox is concerned about the disparities in regard to African Americans and colon cancer.

“There’s less than 50 percent of our population that go to be screened, and when they’re screened if they do have colon cancer, it’s often caught at an later stage,” she said.

The American Cancer Society notes that even though the use of colon screening tests in African Americans rose from 4 percent in 1987 to over 39 percent in 2001, the percentage is still too low.

Colon cancer is considered the third most common cancer and the third leading cause of cancer death in both African-American men and women. The disease occurs when cancer cells form in the colon, which is a part of the digestive system.

When she was diagnosed in November 1998, Cox was not aware that she had a family history of cancer.

Instead of experiencing typical symptoms of colon cancer such as rectal bleeding and unexplained weight loss, Cox experienced stomach cramping. She brought the persistent cramping to the attention of her primary care physician, who recommended a colonoscopy after a series of other tests.

Polyps were found during the procedure and she was later diagnosed with stage III colon cancer. She underwent surgery and six months of chemotherapy at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.

After seven years in remission, the cancer returned in 2005 to the same exact site. A pathology report revealed that the mass originated from the original tumor.

"Depression and anxiety really affected me adversely. That is something that I really had a challenge with," said Cox, who has been in remission for five years.

While her journey with cancer has been challenging, Cox is not complaining.

"I'm just truly blessed knowing that there are some people that are not here," she said. "I look at every day as a gift. It makes you so much more aware."

Cox is gearing up for a workshop sponsored by the Colon Cancer Alliance, titled "Frankly Speaking About Colorectal Cancer," scheduled for Feb. 20 from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at The Wellness Community of Philadelphia.

Sponsored by the Colon Cancer Alliance, the workshop focuses on current treatments, symptom/side effect management and the challenges of living with and beyond colorectal cancer. Dr. Bruce J. Giantonio, associate professor of medicine at Abramson Cancer Center at the University of Pennsylvania, will be the speaker.

To register call (215) 879-7733 by Feb. 17.