



Breast Health Advocates Focus on Disparities among African American Women

By Jennifer Bihm, Staff Writer

Published May 24, 2017



"Gains from the war on breast cancer have sidestepped African American women," said members of the Susan G. Komen Circle of Promise, a group dedicated to more positive outcomes, when it comes to black women's breast health.

Breast Health advocates from all over the state of California, gathered at the Dignity Health Enhancement Center in Long Beach on Wednesday May 17, to highlight their successful, community-led movement toward reducing late stage breast cancer diagnoses among African American women. The advocates are part of the Susan G. Komen Circle of Promise, a group dedicated to more positive outcomes, when it comes to Black women's breast health. They are creating projects like bringing mobile and free mammograms to low income neighborhoods, they said, and raising funds to garner resources to combat barriers to timely diagnoses and care.

According to the Circle, “across California, despite having lower breast cancer incidence rates, African American women’s mortality rates are 41 percent higher than their counterparts. The same research indicates that African American women are often diagnosed at later stages, sometimes with more aggressive forms of cancer and at younger ages. Gains from the war on breast cancer have sidestepped African American women.”

“In Los Angeles County it is 56 percent more,” explained Mark Pilon, executive director for Susan G. Komen Los Angeles County in a recent interview with the Sentinel.

“Late stage diagnoses indicate that African American women are not going to get check-ups early enough or often enough.

“If they haven’t gone [for instance] for three or four years, then things aren’t discovered until they appear and are symptomatic... maybe on an external level they’re having some itching around the areola or some leakage and that’s what tells them something’s wrong. But by then, it’s advanced.”

Barriers, Pilon said, include difficult socio-economic situations, transportation problems, and the most significant, fear and myth.

“[For example] If I get a mammogram, that machine is going to give me breast cancer or if I get a bump or a bruise that’s going to turn into breast cancer,” Pilon said.

Members of the Circle said they are making strong efforts to dispel those myths, while also counteracting other obstacles to better breast health among African American women.

“All of us are focused on addressing the compounding social, cultural, financial and geographic barriers that continue to confront African American women, regardless of their insurance status,” said Dr. Suzanne Afflalo, a physician with Kaiser Permanente and a Komen San Diego advocate.

“We have developed the strategic partnerships needed to stand together to change this alarming disparity.”

“We’re trying to create a cultural shift and say, ‘regular mammography, regular clinical breast exams are your friends not your enemies,’” Pilon said.

“Many women of color (for instance) put their kids and their husbands first but if you’re not making these things a priority- because it’s one in eight women that at some point will be diagnosed with breast cancer- you’re not going to be here for them.

“You need to make yourself enough of a priority to ensure that you’re here to take care of them and that you’re here to see them graduate and go on and see your grand babies and hopefully your great grandbabies...”