

AHN Cancer Institute Opens Glimmer of Hope Metastatic Breast Cancer Center, Advancing Care for Women with Late-Stage Disease

PITTSBURGH, Pa. (Oct. 20, 2020) – When Carol Wiltse was diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer in 2018, it was a difficult time for her and for her three adult sons. In the weeks that followed, having metastatic cancer became “almost like a full-time job,” she said.

The Beaver Falls woman juggled multiple appointments with different specialists, for scans and infusions and radiation therapy. Even with the help of her sons, it was a lot to keep track of.

For patients like Carol, Allegheny Health Network (AHN) Cancer Institute has opened the Glimmer of Hope Metastatic Breast Cancer Center, offering patients with advanced breast cancer comprehensive, centralized, coordinated care with special attention to clinical trial options and quality-of-life issues.

Located within the new, state-of-the-art AHN Cancer Institute – Allegheny General, and opened with funding from Pittsburgh nonprofit Glimmer of Hope, the William F. and Lynn D. Gauss Foundation, and other key donors, the Metastatic Breast Cancer Center offers care that revolves entirely around women with late-stage breast cancer, prioritizing their time and their unique needs.

“Women with metastatic breast cancer are more than just patients. They are mothers, daughters, wives, friends, co-workers and employers, and we want to help them to live their lives as normally as possible,” said Christie Hilton, DO, director of the Metastatic Breast Center and medical oncology lead physician for the Breast Cancer Leadership team at the AHN Cancer Institute. “By centralizing her needs into one visit, we can help allay the stress and complexity of having to get to multiple appointments at different locations, and quickly get her back to living her life.”

While breast cancer is curable when detected early, about 30 percent of early-stage breast cancer patients eventually develop Stage IV metastatic cancer, when the disease has spread to other parts of the body. While it is incurable, an increasing number of women survive many years with metastatic cancer, thanks to new treatments.

Carol’s cancer, originally diagnosed in 2006, had spread to her bones and was inoperable. The lump in Carol’s breast is gone, and the cancer in her bones is not growing. She remains on the same treatment for the past three years and is living a full life with metastatic breast cancer.

“We believe women should consider clinical trial options at all stages of their treatment, and in some cases we use technology to tell us about the genetics of a particular tumor, to help us determine which trials might be appropriate for each patient,” Dr. Hilton said. “Our collaboration with Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center allows us to screen patients for clinical trials at either location, increasing the number of options available to patients.”

The Metastatic Breast Cancer Center holds a weekly in-house tumor board dedicated to discussing individual patients, their treatment, and potential eligibility for clinical trials.

Each patient at the Metastatic Breast Cancer Center will be assigned a collaborative nurse who accompanies her to appointments, takes notes, and is available for follow-up questions. Patients may also meet with an integrative medicine specialist who can recommend and arrange services such as acupuncture that can help with symptom management, paid for by funding from Glimmer of Hope.

Patients at the center might also meet with a pharmacist to discuss medication side effects, work with an oncology rehab specialist on strength or balance training, or talk with a behavioral health specialist to address mental health, body image, or intimacy issues.

For Carol, a resource such as the Metastatic Breast Cancer Center would have helped not only her, but her sons, who provided emotional and practical help.

“It’s exciting to have this kind of expertise for metastatic patients, and access to advanced clinical trials right in our own backyard,” Carol said. “Having this resource would have helped not only me but my sons, who provided so much emotional and practical help. I look forward to taking advantage of the new center’s services in the future.”

“I have metastatic breast cancer, but I don’t let it define me,” Carol said. “Every day I wake up and I know I have cancer. And I deal with it, just as people who have diabetes or heart disease deal with their illness every day. I stay focused on the present and don’t let my mind wander somewhere it doesn’t belong.”

“Thanks to medical advances, many patients live for years with metastatic breast cancer,” Dr. Hilton said. “We thank Glimmer of Hope, and all of our donors, for this center that will help metastatic breast cancer patients maintain their quality of life, physically and emotionally.”

About Allegheny Health Network – and the AHN Cancer Institute

Allegheny Health Network, a Highmark Health Company, is a western Pennsylvania-based integrated healthcare system that serves patients from across a five-state region that includes western Pennsylvania and the adjacent regions of Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, and New York. The Network’s Cancer Institute employs more than 200 physicians and 500 oncology professionals who provide a complete spectrum of oncology care at 24 affiliated oncology clinics, including access to state-of-the-art technologies and new therapies being explored in hundreds of clinical cancer trials. The Cancer Institute has the only cancer program in the Pittsburgh region accredited as an Integrated Network Cancer Program by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer, and its radiation oncology program is the largest in the country accredited by the American Society for Radiation Oncology. AHN Cancer Institute is a Quality Oncology Practice Initiative certified practice, and is accredited by the Foundation for Accreditation of Cellular Therapy, National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers and the National Accreditation Program for Rectal Cancer. AHN also has a formal affiliation with the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins, one of the nation’s 41 comprehensive cancer centers designated by the National Cancer Institute, for research, medical education and clinical services.

