

spotlight

Virginia Mason Memorial, North Star Lodge Cancer Center Yakima, Washington



Visitors and patients to North Star Lodge Cancer Center in Yakima, Wash., may do a double-take when approaching the facility for the first time. Part of Virginia Mason Memorial, the cancer center is located in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains and resembles a mountain lodge.

Senior director of the Oncology Service Line, Carol Vanevenhoven, PharmD, MBA, explains how this unusual design came about: “We had a physician with a vision to remove environmental stress from the equation of cancer care. The community really got behind the idea and with the help of The Memorial Foundation, and with many generous donors, we made it a reality.”

Built in 1999, the interior of North Star also mimics the aesthetics of a mountain lodge. The high, vaulted ceilings feature large exposed log beams. There are river rock fireplaces and large windows that allow for the maximum amount of natural light. Almost every corner of the building provides a view of either nature or a water feature that creates a calming sound as patients and visitors move throughout the building.

“You would not recognize this as a medical facility from the entry points into the clinical areas. It is designed to meet all the medical and licensure standards but in a way that sets patients and their families at ease,” says the executive director of North Star, Merle Wolf, FACHE, SPHR, SHRM-SCP.

Comprehensive Oncology Services

Virginia Mason Memorial has been continuously accredited by the American College of

Surgeons Commission on Cancer (CoC) since 1981. North Star Lodge is also accredited by The Joint Commission as part of the hospital.

The comprehensive cancer center houses medical oncology (staffed by six medical oncologists and two mid-levels), radiation oncology (staffed by three radiation oncologists), on-site laboratory services, pharmacy, and infusion on the first floor of the building. Radiation oncology services include two Varian TruBeam linear accelerators and on-site CT imaging. This allows radiation oncologists to do all aspects of treatment planning without patients needing to leave the building.

The coordination between radiation and medical oncology teams is important to patients and providers. Radiation oncologist Ellis Ziel, MD, says, “I can walk right across the building to meet with other medical experts regarding treatment coordination and care instead of calling or emailing another facility for information. This is patient centered care at its best.”

The lower level of North Star contains integrative services: genetic counselors, dietitians, the clinical trials department, cancer registry, financial advocates, social workers, navigation, support group space, and a patient library.

Medical oncologist Thomas Giever, DO, MBA, said he came to North Star Lodge because he wanted “to be part of a team that delivers state-of-the-art therapy and also participates in clinical research trials providing novel treatment options. The supportive care services at North Star allow us to help the whole person and not just treat a disease.”

Vanevenhoven says the on-site pharmacy services are a great convenience for patients. “They are able to dispense the majority of oral chemotherapy agents. So many of our patients can get their prescription dispensed here at the center, talk to a pharmacist if they’re having any challenges, and have someone proactively checking up with them about how they’re tolerating their oral agents and compliance.”

The Oncology Care Model

North Star Lodge is one of only three practices in Washington state participating in the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) Oncology Care Model (OCM).

The cancer center hopes that participation in this demonstration project will result in positive changes in cancer-care delivery. “We see this project as a way to be innovative and ensure that our care delivery model is patient focused and cost effective while delivering the best possible advanced care,” said Wolf.

The cancer center embarked on its OCM journey in July 2016. Since then, one of the areas of focus has been patient navigation. While the cancer center historically has always offered some form of navigation, four nurses are now solely dedicated to patient navigation and work closely with the social work department. As part of the OCM, staff implemented a new type of weekly complex case review that heavily leverages the skills of navigators and social workers. This case review focuses on the social determinants of a patient’s health-care, rather than the clinical focus of the



cancer center's multidisciplinary disease site-specific tumor boards.

Cost of Care Conversations

According to Vanevenhoven, social determinants of health play a big role in the care of patients. In Yakima, 20.5 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty level. Overall health literacy is low too, with nearly 25 percent having less than basic understanding of health-related issues.

At North Star, when social work staff administered distress screening with patients, the results showed a high number of patients who were worried about the financial piece. A process change was implemented: staff began proactively having conversations with patients about costs of care and financial assistance resources. The result was a correlation between adding proactive cost-of-care discussions and a decrease in the amount of financial distress seen in patients upon initial screening. "We now have data to demonstrate that our financial counseling is truly making a difference above and beyond anecdotal stories of patients," said Vanevenhoven.


The financial counselors at the cancer center are not licensed social workers.

Rather, they have a different specialized skill set to check benefits and meet with patients to specifically talk about financial resources, allowing the social workers time to have different types of conversations with patients about other barriers to care, such as transportation.

One of the challenges often seen is transportation—about one-third of the cancer center's patients travel between 25 to 50 miles for treatment. "Since we don't have a great public transportation system in our community, we must leverage other resources, whether it's working with community partners like People for People or working with the Memorial Foundation to purchase gas cards for patients," said Vanevenhoven.

Because the cancer center serves a broad geographical area, it operates two satellite clinics to make access to care easier for the geographically isolated. One clinic is located 30 miles north in Ellensburg, Wash., and the other is 30 miles south in Sunnyside, Wash. The Ellensburg clinic operates five times per month and Sunnyside is open every other week. Both clinics offer medical oncology and chemotherapy services.

North Star Lodge Cancer Center also serves a significant number of people

within the community for whom English is not their first language. "Our population is about 46 percent Caucasian and 46 percent Latino, so we have several bilingual staff here. Not only nurses and physicians but also support staff such as financial counselors," said Wolf. 

Select Supportive Care Services

- Dietitian
- Financial counseling
- Support groups
- Genetic counseling
- Oncology physical therapy and exercise program

Number of new analytic cases seen in 2016: 853