





# A Community Comes Together to Help Patients with Cancer

A cancer diagnosis is a life-altering event that can result in significant financial hardship. Patients are often underinsured, uninsured, have high deductibles, or are unable to work during treatment. For clinicians, financial challenges are understandably an area of distress that we want to minimize for our patients. In 2009 the Ann B. Barshinger Cancer Institute, Lancaster, Pa., part of the Lancaster General Health system, partnered with the Lancaster General Health Foundation to launch a fund to provide financial support for needy patients. The funding program has evolved over the past four years to include other revenue sources and guidelines to ensure consistent execution and evaluation.

## The Lancaster General Health Foundation

The Lancaster General Health Foundation is a private, non-profit foundation dedicated to supporting excellence in patient care across the Lancaster General Health system. It has raised more than \$80 million to support health system priorities, including \$25.2 million for the campaign to build the Cancer Institute. Fundraising for the oncology service line that supports patient care, equipment and technology needs, staff education, and research remains a continued priority for the Foundation.

The Foundation, working with the oncology leadership, develops donor opportunities to support patients receiving care. In addition to providing patient financial support, program development for survivorship services is seen as an opportunity

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for growth and development for the Institute. The community has responded generously. The Foundation has one fund that is devoted solely to supporting the financial needs of patients receiving treatment at the Cancer Institute: the Cancer Patient Support Fund.

## Wraparound Services

As the Ann B. Barshinger Cancer Institute prepared for the opening of its new facility in 2013, leadership felt that a plan for wrap-around services was imperative. Specifically, cancer program

leadership outlined the support services necessary to assist patients throughout the disease trajectory. Social work, genetic and behavioral counseling, nurse navigation, and financial counseling were identified as needs, and a staffing plan was developed. By opening day, the oncology financial counselor was ready to provide comprehensive assistance to patients. Over the past two years supportive service positions grew to match our growing patient volume; with this growth came additional patients who needed financial assistance.

From the day the Cancer Institute opened, leadership recognized that the two biggest barriers facing our patients were emotional distress and financial concerns. Thus, many of our patients receive referrals to the oncology financial counselor. Patients who may benefit from such a referral are identified at several touch points, including:

- Upon entry to our healthcare system during distress screenings
- From conversations with patients at the registration desk
- By providers during office visits.

Staff listens for key words or comments, such as concern about being able to work during treatment, fear of losing insurance, cost of drugs, and questions about what services are covered by insurance, and we often uncover financial problems after treatment begins. At every encounter, staff goes out of its way to treat

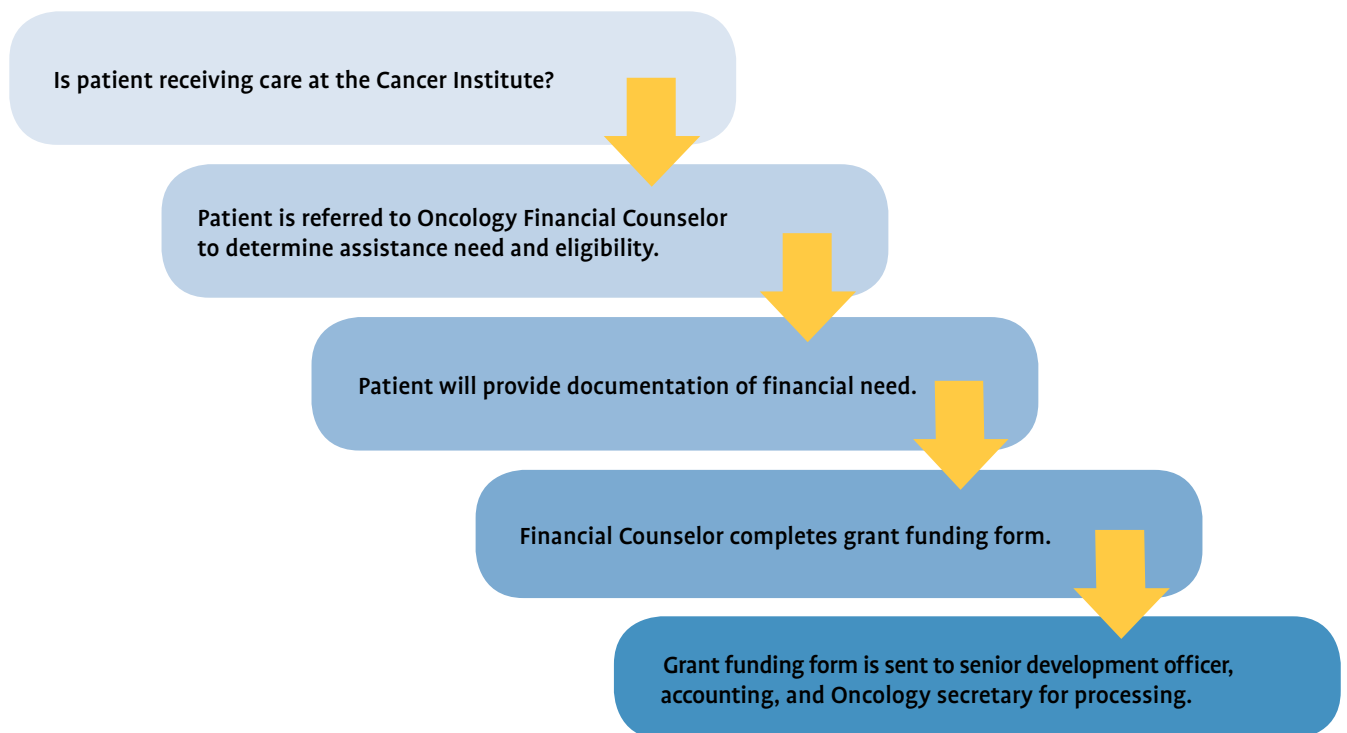
patients with great sensitivity and respect—we’ve found that many of these individuals have never previously had to ask for financial assistance.

### The Importance of the Oncology Financial Counselor

Daily, these professionals counsel patients experiencing financial distress and personal hardship as a result of the cost of their cancer treatment, including challenges paying for everyday necessities. Some patients even file for bankruptcy or are at constant risk of losing their home due to medical debt. According to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, patients with cancer are 2.5 times more likely to declare bankruptcy than people without cancer.<sup>1</sup>

At the Ann B. Barshinger Cancer Institute, we provide one-on-one financial counseling to patients, addressing their financial concerns and helping them complete applications for assistance programs. The oncology financial counselor also manages and screens patients for the multiple grants provided by the Lancaster General Health Foundation’s Cancer Patient Support Fund. These grants help patients with gap funding, disease screening costs, and/or assistance with over-the-counter medications. Funds are distributed to patients who are deemed low income and who meet our medical and financial guidelines.

Figure 1. Grant Process





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## Cancer Patient Support Guidelines & Application Process

To ensure a consistent application process for the Cancer Patient Support Fund, the Cancer Institute developed and implemented guidelines for cancer patients. To be eligible for a grant, patients must:

- Have a cancer diagnosis
- Be under the care of a Cancer Institute provider
- Comply with treatment plan and appointments
- Have an annual income within 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

When patients apply for a grant, they must submit a bill for payment; the oncology financial counselor then completes the needed forms: a funding request form and a check request. On average, the check request process takes two weeks.

To avoid fraud, checks are made out directly to the vendor of service. Once these forms are completed, they are submitted to the Foundation for an approval signature. After securing necessary signatures, the form is sent to the accounting department for processing. A tracking spreadsheet documents the date, patient information, bill amount, and type of bill paid. To ensure data accuracy and privacy, this spreadsheet is accessible by only a few employees.

A color coding process helps signal if patients are approaching the annual maximum dollar amount for assistance, which is \$500 per fund. Currently the Cancer Patient Support Fund has seven separate funds, some targeted for a specific disease site, such as breast cancer. In individual cases, additional funds can be allocated

by the financial counselor with supervisory approval. These steps make the application process smooth, concise, equitable, and error proof (Figure 1, left).

After the patient's bill is submitted for processing, the oncology financial counselor sends patients a letter and a card that identifies the fund that paid their bill. A cover letter is included along with the card. This is done because many patients thought that the hospital provided the financial support, and it was important for them to know that their generous community provided the funding dollars.

## Building Community Awareness & Relationships

Due to ever-increasing funding needs, it is vital to maintain the donor revenue stream, which is accomplished in many ways. Within our community, the Cancer Institute works to build relationships and heighten the awareness of community stakeholders. Donations can be big or small—all are welcome. Frequently, patients and/or families want to give back to the Cancer Institute, or pay it forward. Here is a list of activities that we engage in to build and increase awareness:

- **Building tours**, which highlight the Cancer Institute's unique design and care delivery model.
- **Formal funding check presentations**, which recognize group or individual donors. We take pictures and post them on the Foundation website.
- **Presentation of "Mission Moments"** where meaningful stories are shared at various meetings to reinforce the significant financial needs of patients.
- **Development Committee activities**. The purpose of this com-

# THE ANN B. BARSHINGER CANCER INSTITUTE AT-A-GLANCE

Opened in July 2013, the Ann B. Barshinger Cancer Institute was built to serve its community—specifically, so families did not have to travel outside of their community to receive oncology care. The Cancer Institute provides access to advanced medical treatments, the newest technologies, and a multispecialty network of clinicians who work together to ensure that patients receive the most effective treatment plan for the best possible outcome. The state-of-the-art facility offers its community skilled and compassionate treatment teams who coordinate care and support recovery, including one convenient location for medical care, support services, and wellness and survivorship programs. Personalized care is focused on the mind,

body, and spiritual well-being of our patients; the environment is designed around patient comfort. The Cancer Institute's mission: to reduce the burden of suffering due to cancer in the communities we serve.

Our top cancer sites are breast, lung, and colon, with 2,047 analytic cases for 2014. We serve the Lancaster County community—a population of 529,000 and the city of Lancaster with approximately 60,000 residents. Both have very diverse needs; a thriving city surrounded by a more traditional farming community, including a large Amish population. The city of Lancaster is located in southeastern section of Pennsylvania, approximately 90 minutes west of Philadelphia.

mittee is to advance the fundraising priorities at the Cancer Institute. The committee works closely with the Lancaster General Health Foundation staff and Board of Trustees and Cancer Institute leadership to build sustainable fundraising programs for the oncology service line.

- **Sharing patient feedback with donors.** Emails and letters of thanks from patients are shared with donors. Some patients attend donor events and provide a short explanation of how money from the Cancer Patient Support Fund helped them during their treatment. When patients are willing to do this, it reinforces the importance of continued fundraising.
- **Hosting survivorship activities.** Patients feel strongly about the impact these programs have to help them transition back to a new norm after treatment.
- **Attending local community events.** Staff provides support at local events to highlight awareness and fundraising for donor events, serving at registration or participating in fundraising events.
- **Recognizing “Healthcare Heroes.”** This method for recognizing providers or staff comes in the form of a card, which is filled out by patients; patients can also make a donation. The staff or provider receives a healthcare hero pin and a copy of the card.
- **Sending thank you notes.** These personal handwritten notes are sent to donors, thanking them for their donation(s).

## Making a Difference

Over the past three years, the Cancer Institute has built a successful financial assistance program in terms of dollars raised and the number of patients served. Yet, we continue to identify additional funding opportunities to deliver ongoing financial assistance.

In the last three years, the Cancer Patient Support Fund has paid out nearly \$85,000 in funds to more than 200 cancer patients.

During FY 2015 the Cancer Institute held an inaugural event, The Gingham Gala, to raise funds specifically for the Cancer Patient Support Fund. This money is for any cancer patient and is not disease-site specific. The gala raised more than \$82,000. This event was so successful that the Cancer Institute hosted it again this year on May 21, raising \$112,000 for the fund.

## Patient & Family Satisfaction

The Cancer Institute's Cancer Patient Support Fund is a financial safety net for many patients, and patients and families express tremendous appreciation for this support through heartfelt letters, words of thanks, and by giving back once they are able.

In the words of one of our patients, “What a gift for so many people that traveling to other cities is no longer necessary. What a gift for so many people to be able to stay at home around family and friends. What a gift for so many of us to be able to conserve our energy to improve our treatments and health by being treated at the Cancer Institute. If it were not for the community who has given so generously to support patients and programs, there would be many people who would struggle. The Cancer Institute is a magnificent facility with the most caring and devoted people I have ever met.” 📷

*Patricia Inama Roda, MSN, BS, RN, oncology clinical support manager, and Jaime Fritchman, BS, oncology business office manager at the Ann B. Barshinger Cancer Institute, Lancaster, Pa.*

## References

1. Ramsey S, et al. Washington State cancer patients found to be at greater risk for bankruptcy than people without a cancer diagnosis. *Health Affairs*. 2013;32(6):1143-1152.