



INNOVATION

How The American Cancer Society Is Advancing Health Equity With Genentech



American Cancer Society **BRANDVOICE** | Paid Program



Jun 9, 2023, 02:38pm EDT

Updated Jun 13, 2023, 08:42am EDT

By Natalie Burg

Since 1991, the cancer death rate in the U.S. has **dropped 33%**. According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), that translates to 3.8 million fewer cancer deaths between 1991 and 2020. Even with that significant shift, disparities in cancer care persist, affecting patient access and treatment options to survivability. **Research shows that the vast majority of the adjustable factors in health outcomes** aren't related to medical care but are tied to health-related behaviors as well as environmental and socioeconomic conditions.



GETTY

“We’ve made tremendous strides when it comes to improving outcomes for cancer patients and their families,” says Tawana Thomas Johnson, ACS’s senior vice president and chief diversity officer. “But unfortunately, not all communities have benefited equally.”

ACS’s goal is to end cancer as we know it, for everyone, and investing in health equity is core to its mission. Behind this vision is a meaningful partnership: ACS and biotechnology company Genentech, a member of the Roche Group, formed a game-changing alliance more than 20 years ago and are currently focused on a [\\$4 million effort to improve cancer outcomes for marginalized communities](#) by expanding access to cancer screenings, treatment, patient programs and more.

“We cannot solve systemic healthcare issues alone,” says Joy Russell, Genentech’s vice president of external affairs. “Working with partners like ACS really does extend our impact.”

Getting More Communities Screened For Cancer

In 2020, even before the pandemic caused a drastic drop in [cancer screenings](#), ACS launched the [Get Screened initiative](#). With Genentech's support as the founding sponsor, the three-year campaign's effort to improve cancer screening rates in communities facing inequities was pivotal.

Since the initiative's launch, approximately 500,000 breast, cervical, colorectal and lung cancer screenings have been performed and nearly 11,000 cancers have been diagnosed. Russell says Genentech is proud to have helped ACS increase screening rates in such a monumental way.

“It was [an] opportunity for us to get individuals [connected] to screening, diagnose cancers that were there and then ultimately help get those individuals into cancer care,” says Thomas Johnson.

How were ACS and Genentech able to make that kind of an impact during one of the most challenging times in history? Leaning on the power of collaboration, they worked with health systems across the country on simple yet effective actions, from client appointment reminders to bigger efforts like mobile clinics and providing free rides to screenings.

Advancing public policy also played a role in the initiative's success. ACS's advocacy affiliate, the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), led efforts in 40 states to protect or increase funding for breast and cervical cancer screening programs that serve limited-income, uninsured and underinsured women. In addition, ACS CAN secured the first increase in federal dollars for the program in 10 years.

Representation was at the core of the initiative's ripple effect. As one of the largest public awareness campaigns in ACS history, Get Screened included a broad range of messages across social media and paid advertising channels, from videos featuring patients and survivors of color sharing their stories to Spanish-language messaging and engagement from social media influencers.

Thomas Johnson recalls meeting a woman from a marginalized community who felt fear and mistrust toward the healthcare system and had never been screened for breast cancer, despite having a family history of the disease. After seeing Get Screened promotions for a free cancer screening featuring people who looked like her, the woman's perception shifted.

“She was able to see herself, [and] as a result, she felt comfortable to [get] screened for breast cancer,” Thomas Johnson says.

The initiative also published 47 screening-related research manuscripts and two national roundtables on [breast cancer](#) and [cervical cancer](#). The research provides insights into [pandemic-era screening rates and diagnoses](#) within vulnerable and at-risk populations to deepen the medical community's understanding of health equity challenges.

“We're trying to address the root causes of healthcare disparities and advance as a collective healthcare system,” says Russell.

What Everyday Health Equity Challenges Look Like

Healthcare disparities are often presented in stark numbers: [Black women are 40% more likely to die from breast cancer than white women](#); rural and low-income patients are [more likely to die from cancer](#) than urban and higher-income patients; Hispanic cancer patients are [less likely to be diagnosed](#) early, when treatment may help and before cancer has a chance to spread.

Top of mind for ACS and Genentech are the people behind those statistics—the patients whose circumstances exacerbate barriers to care, from transportation to nutrition to accommodations during treatment. Even maintaining a nutritious diet to support cancer recovery is a health equity need, Thomas Johnson explains.

“If you’re not in an area with a comprehensive cancer center, how are you going to get to chemo every week?” says Thomas Johnson. “Through this partnership, we are identifying ways to support patients when it comes to transportation [and with] lodging if they have to travel out of state to receive cancer care.”

Diversifying Clinical Trials To Improve Access To Care

Expanding access to high-quality, innovative cancer care requires rethinking the entire care landscape, including who’s involved in clinical trials.

Over the past 25 years, [more than 90% of clinical trial participants](#) have been white. That systemic inequity means trial outcomes don’t always reflect how a medicine or treatment affects non-white patients. It also limits which patients get early access to the experimental treatments clinical trials often grant. ACS and Genentech are aiming to improve representation in clinical trials to ultimately transform the pipeline from top to bottom.

“We’ll do that by working collaboratively to look at the design of clinical trials and at the diversity of the workforce when it comes to running clinical trials,” says Thomas Johnson.

Also on their agenda: increasing access to biomarker testing and emerging therapies. Biomarker testing allows clinicians to use a patient’s unique genetic information to deliver personalized treatment plans—an added notch in the partnership’s vision for a more equitable future.

With Genentech’s support, ACS CAN led successful state legislative campaigns across the country to expand insurance coverage of biomarker testing, eliminating a significant barrier to testing for many patients. To date, nine states have enacted such laws.

“Genentech and ACS have consistently brought both meaningful and measurable results together,” says Russell. Looking toward the future, ACS and Genentech are eager for more progress.

“The fight against cancer [is] multifactorial and multifaceted,” Thomas Johnson says. “When organizations like ACS and Genentech come together to improve cancer outcomes for all patients, we can make a difference.”



American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society has a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. We're improving the lives of people with cancer and their... **Read More**

[Editorial Standards](#)

[Reprints & Permissions](#)