

Research Navigation Program to Enhance Diversity

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1. Background

Texas leads the nation in the number of uninsured individuals, with 16.6 percent lacking health insurance. Disparities persist among ethnic and racial minority groups, with 48.9 percent of Hispanics, 26.5 percent of Blacks, and 14.0 percent of Non-Hispanic whites lacking insurance. These gaps contribute to late-stage cancer diagnoses, impacting survival rates and hindering clinical trial participation due to high out-of-pocket expenses. Cancer clinical trials often suffer from under-enrollment (particularly among women and minority populations). Patient-level barriers, including financial constraints, fear, and medical mistrust, persist despite extensive research, prompting the need for a tailored, evidence-based approach at specific clinical sites. Innovative methodologies and building trusting relationships between minority communities and research institutions are crucial for advancing participation in clinical research and improving survival rates.

2. Goals

The goal of the Research Navigation Program to Enhance Diversity is to assist patients with either participating in a new therapeutic clinical trial or staying on one. Through Research Navigators, the program seeks to provide minority patients or those with financial needs with personalized support and guidance by offering clinical trials education; connecting patients to MD Anderson services and community resources such as the Lazarex IMPACT (Improving Patient Access to Cancer Clinical Trials)/CARE Program; and offering support as a contact for general questions about hospital support services and clinical trial participation.

3. Solutions and Methods

The Center for Community-Engaged Translational Research (CCETR) at MD Anderson Cancer Center has implemented the Research Navigation Program to Enhance Diversity as part of the Lazarex IMPACT program to reduce barriers to clinical trial participation and support participant-centered clinical trials. The program, prioritizing most vulnerable individuals who may not participate in clinical trials due to financial constraints, offers personalized patient navigation services and financial reimbursements for out-of-pocket expenses related to clinical trial participation such as travel reimbursement. Research navigators play a critical role in enhancing patient understanding of clinical trials, facilitating access, and addressing post-enrollment concerns to ensure retention and completion.

4. Outcomes

The MD Anderson reimbursement program, initiated in October 2020, has shown promising results. As of February 2024, the Research Navigation Program to Enhance Diversity received 265 patient referrals; 214 (81 percent of referred patients) received research navigation services. About 26 percent of participants are African American/Black, 10 percent are Asian, and 57 percent are white; 23 percent have Latino/Hispanic origin. Half of the patients are women. Approximately 91 percent of participants hold positive feelings towards the program. Most participants (72 percent) express a need for help in covering parking and other costs not paid by insurance. One-hundred thirteen (113) patients were approved for the Lazarex Financial Reimbursement Program, with 64 patients receiving reimbursements totaling approximately \$208,000. Many indicate a desire to acquire more information about clinical trials (63 percent) and resources available (80 percent).

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Future efforts will focus on expanding the reach of the patient navigation program, evaluating and refining the program based on patient outcomes and feedback, and demonstrating increased accrual to clinical trials as a result of this program. Currently, we are expanding the program to Lyndon B. Johnson MD Anderson Outpatient Clinic.