TITLE: WINGS Women Inspiring, Nurturing, Giving, and Supporting one another: A Peer Counseling Program for Breast Cancer Patients,

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Objectives: The Breast Center at Sutter Pacific Medical Foundation is Santa Rosa, California diagnoses approximately 140 women per year with breast cancer. A nurse navigator and bi-lingual resource specialist work with patients at risk for or newly diagnosed with breast cancer at the diagnostic center. In order to expand support throughout the entire trajectory of care we developed a philanthropically funded peer counseling program.

Methods: A detailed programmatic plan was developed to address WINGS structure, finances, legalities, policies, and logistical components. Several potential volunteers were interviewed by a panel and selected to receive one day training. Two breast cancer survivors were hired to serve as coordinators of the program and are actively involved in monthly volunteer meetings and ongoing coaching and support of the volunteers. Patients newly diagnosed through the breast center are given information about WINGS at the time of their navigation visit for pathology results and resource visit. If patient wants to receive peer counseling support, consent forms and confidentiality forms are signed. Coordinators are notified who then match newly diagnosed patients with the appropriate volunteer based on diagnosis and anticipated treatment plan. Patients are contacted by their assigned volunteer who calls and establishes patient preferences for contact. Counseling is limited to meeting in a provider’s office, phone support or meeting at a public place.

Results: During the first 4 months of the program there were over 50 hours of volunteer contact time with an additional 30 patients supported by the coordinators. The number of patient currently enrolled into this new program is 19 active patients. Volume is increasing weekly and patient response to the program is evaluated with every call using the distress thermometer at the beginning and end of each call. The success of this program has spawned a new component called WINGMEN, a peer counseling program for men with cancer.

Conclusions:

Peer counseling provides unique support as patients can be heard and receive understanding from someone who has “been there”. Literature reveals peer counselors can decrease isolation and anxiety and increase the sense of normalcy and optimism while going through a difficult time. And, as stated by “the helper therapy principle”, providing peer support also benefits the well-being of our survivor volunteers.