

# Fighting Chance Expands Cancer Support Services To Spanish Speakers

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**By Alisha Steindecker**

Eight cancer patients and their families left the East Hampton Healthcare Foundation last week better prepared to navigate the care system.

The program they had attended was the first support group organized by Fighting Chance in Sag Harbor that was dedicated to helping them understand the disease as well as treatment options, financial issues and more—all in Spanish.

It was the culmination of months of hard work undertaken by the Fighting Chance staff, who investigated and defined a real need for a group to support Spanish speakers with cancer on the South Fork.

“There are a lot of people who don’t speak English with cancer,” said the founding chairman of the nonprofit Fighting Chance, Duncan Darrow. “Our mission is to provide free care to as many people as we can, and here was a sizable block where we were not delivering our service because of a language barrier,” he added. “It got under our skin and bugged us that we couldn’t solve that problem.”

And so Fighting Chance’s first support group for Spanish-speakers emerged. Spanish speakers will now have the opportunity to take part in all of the services that Fighting Chance offers—and all for free.

“We do navigation, helping people to get connected with doctors and finances,” Mr. Darrow explained, adding that a large part of Fighting Chance’s resources are dedicated to mental health care. “Counseling is the emotional side of being diagnosed with cancer: What am I going to tell my kids; if this is the end, what was life about, what was the meaning?”

“Some of the important issues are that Latino people are a little bit more reluctant to say no to doctors if a doctor is explaining something to them, like what kind of cancer and complicated treatments, and they are not sure they understand what the doctor told them,” said Dr. William DeScipio, the senior clinical adviser at Fighting Chance.

According to the Institute of Medicine, the focus in medicine right now is on patient-centered care, or the lack thereof—doctors are not spending enough time listening to patient concerns.

But it takes two to tango—the Institute of Medicine says that patients also need to ask their doctors questions and be engaged in their treatment processes. Often they are not, as they are nervous about being considered a difficult patient. When something like a language barrier is added to the mix, it makes the already difficult process of achieving patient-centered care much more difficult. Fighting Chance aims to break down this barrier.

“They start off with describing their own history, and so they went around the room, and they listen to what they’ve been diagnosed with, what they understand about it, and the trials and tribulations of dealing with the medical system and insurance, and they become a support group,” Dr. DiScipio said about last week’s kickoff meeting.

Because many Latinos already use services offered by the East Hampton Healthcare Foundation, Fighting Chance decided it was best to locate the support group there, where they are already comfortable.

“It is a support group for any Latino family that wants discussion in Spanish, and it offers all of the services of Fighting Chance,”

Dr. DiScipio said.

The idea behind the support group, Dr. DiScipio explained, went something like this: “I simply want to find someone else that I can speak with, in my culture, that can tell me what it’s like to deal with this disease.”

Blanca Bishop, a patient navigator who works at the East Hampton Healthcare Foundation, will be one of the leaders of the support group, along with Claudia Gonzales, a bilingual assistant at Ellen’s Well at Southampton Hospital. “It is super-important because these people don’t know anybody, they are here by themselves, they don’t know anything about the system, they don’t know the language and they don’t know where to ask for help,” Ms. Bishop said.

She added that it is important that people whose primary language is Spanish whose lives are affected by cancer do not feel alone. “It affects everybody what the doctor says—people cry and laugh and support one another.”

And even at the first meeting, Fighting Chance aimed to mitigate that fear by helping those who attended with tools for handling finances, coping with stress, talking with children, meeting family obligations, seeking second opinions and more.

The group will meet every month for two hours at a time. After the meetings, the leaders will report back to Fighting Chance and let the staff know the main concerns and needs of the group.

“We are providing stipends for the leaders; it is a professional supervised group,” Dr. DiScipio said. “It is not a peer group.” He called Ms. Gonzales and Ms. Bishop “patient advocates.”

“They are there to support each other, to meet other people who are in their same culture, family and background, trying to integrate into the community on the East End,” Dr. DiScipio explained, noting that some patients are recent immigrants.

“Spanish has kind of become something you need to have as a skill,” Mr. Darrow said.