

General Article

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Inward outreach

Staff from range of departments find ideas for reaching the public at Community Collaborative Committee meetings



Staff members from 10 departments, including External Relations, HutchLab, the Alliance, Patient and Family Services, SEP, and Human Resources discuss community outreach at brown bag lunch meetings once a month. Photo by Todd Mcnaught

By MARITA GRAUBE

When a pastor from a rural area of Eastern Washington wanted help forming a cancer-training session for his parish and neighboring areas, he brought his challenge to Dr. Wendy Law of the Science Education Partnership.

Law knew better than to tackle the feat alone. She brought the request to a recently formed Fred Hutchinson group and described the type of training she envisioned. At once, a buzz enveloped the room as people suggested contacts and ideas for Law, who scribbled the notes into her electronic organizer.

One by one, between the occasional bites of their lunches, the other attendees reviewed the highlights of their latest projects. But meetings of the budding group-called the Community Collaborative Committee-aren't just about building relationships with each other.

Every person at the monthly gathering shares the goal of connecting Fred Hutchinson with the public through outreach.

The group grew roots more than a year ago after the idea sprouted with Annie Gugiu, community-relations manager in External Relations and Communications, and Dr. Nancy Hutchison, director of the center's Science Education Partnership (SEP) and HutchLab.

Initially, the two had met to discuss outreach ideas, then discovered that many aspects of their work overlapped. Because other departments also intertwine with the public, Gugiu and

Hutchison started the committee.

"It's genuinely a chance to be informal and stay in touch," Hutchison said. "We save ourselves an enormous amount of work and get the most out of what we do."

Everyone welcome

Anyone can drop in to hear about successful or not-so-successful outreach approaches and receive project advice. As a result, many committee attendees have made new gains in their outreach.

For example, Nancy Zbaren, Pacific region director of the Cancer Information Service, found committee help in outreach to underserved populations that may not take full advantage of health services because of educational, geographical, financial, cultural or language barriers.

She formed a partnership with the Alaskan Native Health Consortium in Anchorage and the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, an organization representing 43 tribal groups in Idaho, Washington and Oregon. Likewise, Teresa Guthrie, CIS liaison, worked with Spirit of EAGLES, an NCI-funded program that connects native youth with science education. The agencies collaborated with Hutchison's HutchLab program to develop hands-on science workshops for tribal youth.

Tribal outreach

"We know that we need researchers from tribal communities who understand the native culture and the background," Hutchison said. "We're pretty passionate about building a pipeline for science. We can start by raising the science experience in native youth."

Like Hutchison, Human Resources specialist Kathe Watanabe, who seeks to increase student internships and locate stipend funding, consults the committee to get the most out of her outreach. At the meetings, she describes logistical difficulties as others offer suggestions.

"We learn about each other's strategies," said Robbie Phillips, community-relations coordinator. "It opens up my thinking about what other people are doing."

The group's members even seek the outreach strategies of scientists by inviting guest speakers, as they did with recently with Dr. Beti Thompson of the Public Health Sciences Division, who presented the group with her recent research and outreach efforts on smoking cessation and pesticide effects among farm workers in the Yakima Valley. Such presentations help the committee share ideas about how to build understanding about clinical trials in mainstream and underserved populations.

In March, the group participated in diversity training arranged by Winona Hauge, community-outreach manager, with the goal of starting dialogue between the committee and other departments.

Participants heard a presentation by Colleen Almojuela, executive director of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education, on "Building Cultural Responsive Teams or Systems," in which they discussed in small groups the diverse backgrounds they bring to the work environment. They also shared information on which diversity outreach efforts are working best.

While the committee focuses on underserved populations, student education and clinical trials, Hutchison emphasized that its outreach spans all corners of the center. Staff from Development to Volunteer Services to the HIV Vaccine Trials Network to Internet Services regularly attend. Some talk about event planning for local and international groups, while others discuss science communication and high-profile fund raising.

The link with Development is crucial, said Kit Herrod, director of corporate relations, who, with Pat McCowan, director of the comprehensive campaign, regularly attends the committee

meetings.

Fund-raising connections

"We can make others aware of Development's outreach and, when appropriate, help link them to donors and corporations," Herrod said. "Being part of the committee also keeps us better informed of initiatives going on within the center so that we can present new ideas to our donors."

The group prides itself on its easy-going attitude. Anyone is welcome to drop in. And as the members of the group share their experiences, everyone offers a bit of encouragement or praise.

"It sounds like a support group," said Hutchison with a laugh, "but it's somewhat true. We are very appreciative of each other and proud of our work with the center."

[Marita Graube is a writer for Northwest Science and Technology.]

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