

‘Cancer Doesn’t Care’: Citizen Lobbyists Unite To Push Past Washington’s Ugly Politics

Americans are split over many issues, but helping people with cancer and other serious illnesses retains broad bipartisan support.

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Mary Catherine Johnson is a retired small-business owner from outside Rochester, New York. She voted for Donald Trump three times.

Lexy Mealing, who used to work in a physician’s office, is from Long Island. She’s a Democrat.

But the women share a common bond. They both survived breast cancer.

And when the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network organized its annual citizen lobby day in Washington last month, Johnson and Mealing were among the more than 500 volunteers pushing Congress to keep cancer research and support for cancer patients at the top of the nation’s health care agenda.

The day is something of a ritual for groups like the cancer organization.

This year, it came as Democrats and Republicans in Washington slid toward a budget impasse that shut down the federal government. But these volunteers transcended their political differences and found common ground.

“Not one person here discussed if you’re a Democrat, if you’re a Republican,” said Mealing, one of 27 volunteers in the New York delegation. “Cancer doesn’t care.”

Every one of the volunteer lobbyists had been touched in some way by the deadly disease, which is expected to kill [more than 600,000](#) people in the U.S. this year.

Johnson said each of her mother’s 10 siblings died from cancer, as did a lifelong friend who died at age 57, leaving behind his wife and two young daughters.

Like many of the New York volunteers, Johnson also said she’s worried about the state of politics

today.

“I think we’re probably the most divided that we’ve ever been,” she said. “That scares me. Scares me for my grandchildren.”

Katie Martin, a cancer volunteer from outside Buffalo, also worries. She and her daughter recently drove past political protesters screaming at one another on the street.

“My daughter is silent and then starts asking, ‘What is this?’ And I don’t know how to explain it, because it doesn’t even make sense to me,” she said. “It’s very heartbreaking.”

Mealing said she can barely watch the news these days. “A lot of Americans are very stressed out. There’s a lot of things going on.”

Americans are indeed split over many issues — immigration, guns, President Trump. But helping people with cancer and other serious illnesses retains broad bipartisan support, polls show.

In [one recent survey](#), 7 in 10 voters said it’s very important for the federal government to fund medical research. That included majorities of Democrats and Republicans.

“It’s rare in today’s environment to see numbers like that,” said Jarrett Lewis, a Republican pollster who conducted the survey for patient groups. “But almost everybody in this country knows somebody who’s had cancer.”

Similarly, a recent [KFF poll](#) found that three-quarters of U.S. adults, including most Republicans who align with the Make America Great Again, or MAGA, movement, want Congress to extend subsidies that help Americans buy health insurance through Affordable Care Act marketplaces.

These subsidies, which are critical to people with chronic illnesses such as cancer, are among the main sticking points in the current budget impasse in Congress.

As the cancer volunteers gathered in a conference hotel in Washington, they focused on their shared agenda: increasing funding for cancer research, retaining insurance subsidies, and expanding access to cancer screening.

“We may not see eye to eye politically. We might not even see eye to eye in social circumstances,” said Martin, the Buffalo-area volunteer. “But we can see beyond those differences because we’re here for one cause.”

The state delegations practiced the pitches they would make to their members of Congress. They ran through the personal stories they would share. And they swapped tips for how to deal with resistant staff and how to ask for a photo with a lawmaker.

On the morning of their lobby day, they reconvened in a cavernous ballroom, decked out in matching blue polo shirts and armed with red information folders to leave at each office they would visit.

They got a pep talk from a pair of college basketball coaches. Then they headed across town to Capitol Hill.

The army of volunteers — from every state in the country — hit 484 of the 535 Senate and House offices.

Not every visit was an unqualified victory. Many Republican lawmakers object to extending the insurance subsidies, arguing they're too costly.

But lawmakers from both parties have backed increased research funding and support for more cancer screening.

And the New Yorkers felt good about the day. "It was amazing," Mealing said as the day wrapped up. "You could just feel the sense of, 'Everybody stronger together.'"

When evening came, the volunteers met on the National Mall for a candlelight vigil. It was raining. Bagpipes played.

Around a pond near the Lincoln Memorial, some 10,000 tea lights glimmered in little paper bags. Each luminary had a name on it — a life touched by cancer.

John Manna, another New Yorker, is a self-described Reagan Republican whose father died from lung cancer. He reflected on the lessons this day could offer a divided nation.

"Talk to people," he said. "Get to know each other as people, and then you can understand somebody's positions. We have little disagreements, but, you know, we don't attack each other. We talk and discuss it."

Manna said he would be back next year.

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