

First Lady Jill Biden Makes Cancer Research a Top Priority

“This is the fight of our lives, and we will never stop working to end this disease,” the first lady told the National Cancer Institute.

February 8, 2021 By [Caroline Tien](#)

First Lady Jill Biden paid a (virtual) visit to the U.S. National Cancer Institute (NCI) on February 3 in a demonstration of her commitment to the fight against cancer. Speaking to an audience that included NCI director Norman E. Sharpless and NCI researchers Wortá McCaskill-Stevens, Stephanie Goff and Ligia Pinto, according to [The Cancer Letter](#), Biden said, “I want you to know—I want to just say it again—the president and I stand with you. This is the fight of our lives, and we will never stop working to end this disease. And together, I know that we’re going to go farther than ever before.”

She was likely speaking as a person as well as a politician. Neither Biden nor her husband, President Joe Biden, have made a secret of the fact that promoting cancer research is a top priority. (On the campaign trail, Joe Biden even pledged to “[cure cancer](#).”) In and out of office, they have spearheaded efforts to reduce the national cancer burden. These include the [Beau Biden Cancer Moonshot](#) (a federal program launched in 2016 to increase the rate of cancer discovery) and the [Biden Cancer Initiative](#) (a private charity formed in 2017 to increase collaboration between companies and organizations conducting relevant research). The Beau Biden Cancer Moonshot is still up and running; however, the Biden Cancer Initiative was [dissolved in 2019](#) to allow the Bidens to focus exclusively on the presidential campaign.

As its full name suggests, the Moonshot program pays homage to a Biden family member: Joe Biden’s eldest son, Beau Biden, who died of [glioblastoma](#), a brain cancer, in 2015 at age 46. While Beau Biden was not Jill Biden’s biological child, she had developed a close relationship with him and described his passing as “shattering” in an interview with [USA Today](#).

But even before Beau’s death, Biden was well aware of the destructive power of cancer. In 1993, four of her friends were diagnosed with breast cancer, spurring her to start the Biden Breast Cancer Initiative, a nonprofit organization that educates Delaware high school students about early detection. What’s more, both of her parents died of cancer.

“Having lived through cancer with so many members of my family and Beau,” she told Sharpless at the NCI event, “it’s just amazing what you’re doing and the hope that you’re giving to families.... You have no idea how much that means.”

First Lady Biden’s appearance was widely interpreted as a show of support for the NCI specifically, especially because it came at a time when the new administration is swamped with pressing domestic and foreign matters. Thanks in large part to [Trump-era budget cuts](#), the NCI has run into funding problems so serious that it will require “legislative intervention and a bolus of funds” to stay afloat, several people with knowledge of the situation told The Cancer Letter.

First Lady Biden’s endorsement could signal a change in fortune for the neglected government agency.

“What a wonderful week for NCI! Yesterday, we had the distinct honor of a truly inspiring virtual visit from First Lady Dr. Jill Biden,” Sharpless wrote in a February 4 email to his NCI colleagues. “It is difficult to overstate the significance of this event: just two weeks after the Inauguration, the Vice President and the First Lady have both visited the NIH and addressed staff. Their message of support for our work is clear, and the nation is counting on us.”

Several of the First Lady’s other recent public engagements have been dedicated to spotlighting cancer research and treatment. On her official [White House page](#), she lists “fighting cancer” as one of her passions. On January 22, two days after the inauguration, she spoke about the [importance of cancer screening](#) in the COVID-19 era, among other topics, at one of the four locations of Whitman-Walker Health, which serves the LGBTQ and HIV communities in Washington, DC. On February 4, World Cancer Day, President Joe Biden released a statement that reinforced that she would take a hard line on cancer.

“This issue is going to be a major area of focus for Jill and her team and a focus of our entire administration as well. We know, as far too many families know, the courage it takes to go to radiation treatments—to face cancer head-on every day,” the president said.

Alluding to the partisan divide in our nation, during her NCI visit, First Lady Biden sought to remind listeners that cancer does not care about political affiliation. The disease, she emphasized, is “not a red issue [or] a blue issue” but “a human issue. It affects all Americans.”

“I’ve seen again and again that there is one challenge that unites us all, one thread of pain that runs through every community, North and South, rich and poor, in the best of times, the depths of this pandemic—and that’s cancer,” she said.

For more on the Biden administration’s approach to combating public health threats, read “[How Will Joe Biden Tackle COVID-19?](#)” and “[Biden Hits the Ground Running on COVID-19, But Faces Daunting Challenges.](#)”

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