

A New Colorado Program Supports Working Cancer Patients

The partnership's program, dubbed WeCanWork, will help remove barriers and support cancer patients in pursuit of work and well-being.

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A new program launched by the [University of Colorado Cancer Center](#), in partnership with the [Center for Health, Work, and Environment](#) at the [Colorado School of Public Health](#) (ColoradoSPH), aims to provide comprehensive support to cancer patients as they balance work responsibilities and treatment.

"The physical and emotional challenges that cancer causes are only exacerbated when patients are unable to work, and financial stress on cancer patients has been associated with worse survival rates," says [Wells Messersmith](#), MD, associate director of clinical services at the CU Cancer Center. "Cancer often strikes people at the prime of their careers, when they are contributing the most to their communities and society as a whole. This project has the potential to greatly improve the situation by tapping into the expertise of occupational health experts to help cancer patients who want to keep working and supporting their families. We are excited to partner with the Colorado School of Public Health on this important initiative."

Workforce support

With 18 million cancer survivors in the United States, half of whom are of working age, there is a significant need for support to help them stay in the workforce during their treatment.

Many cancer survivors face higher rates of absenteeism and struggle with well-being when their physical abilities cannot align with job demands. Most oncology practices are not fully equipped to support patients in overcoming these challenges.

The new program, dubbed [WeCanWork](#) (Well-Being and Cancer at Work), looks to bridge this gap by fostering collaboration between public health and oncology professionals at the CU Cancer Center, [UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital](#), and occupational medicine practices. Built around the [Total Worker Health](#) program designed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, WeCanWork addresses multiple factors across the dimensions of well-being and addresses the work-related needs of cancer survivors to improve overall patient outcomes.

Integrating Total Worker Health into oncology practices

The WeCanWork program combines Total Worker Health research and practice, focusing on long-term assessment of a cancer patient's diagnosis on their employment, financial health, and overall well-being. It also engages and trains oncology care teams on occupational health practices, equipping oncology teams with the tools they need to refer patients to specialized consultation.

Patients referred to the WeCanWork program can see an occupational medicine physician at no out-of-pocket cost. The program simplifies the referral process for oncology practices, allowing them to efficiently send their patients for an occupational medicine consultation.

During these consultations, patients receive recommendations on work accommodations, support with completing forms for disability and paid sick leave, and guidance on discussing their diagnosis and accommodations with their employer to manage work responsibilities while in treatment.

Supporting the whole patient

The goal of WeCanWork is to improve cancer survivors' access to experts who regularly assess their need for work accommodations and determine if they can continue working during periods of illness and disability. Initially focusing on gastrointestinal oncology, the program plans to expand to support all UCHHealth cancer patients.

"The Colorado School of Public Health is uniquely positioned to launch collaborative programs like WeCanWork," says ColoradoSPH dean and CU Cancer Center deputy director [Cathy Bradley](#), PhD, whose research on the economic and financial security of cancer patients led to the creation of the program.

"Because public health sits at the nexus of health care systems, human behavior, economic forces, and more, we can bring together these and other stakeholders to ensure the whole patient is supported and better positioned for economic stability throughout their care on the CU Anschutz Medical Campus."

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