

New CDC-funded portal enables health providers to schedule free colon cancer screenings

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Imagine waiting months for a colorectal cancer screening, only for the appointment to fall between the cracks because of poor communication or, worse, being diagnosed with more advanced disease because of a long delay or lack of access to health care.

Unfortunately, vulnerable minority populations on Chicago's South Side, in Cook County and beyond face these problems routinely. As a result, many people suffer unnecessarily from colorectal cancer.

The University of Chicago Medicine is hoping to lead the way in addressing this issue through ILColonCARES.org, a new website being launched as part of an innovative partnership designed to help [health care providers](#) directly schedule colorectal cancer screenings for Cook County residents ages 50 to 75. The web portal, known as Illinois Colon CARES, also seeks to enhance communication across [health](#) systems and provide timely results to patients and their doctors.

Inaugural partners for the initiative, in addition to UChicago Medicine, include Rush University Medical Center, Heartland Health Centers, Community Health, Friend Family Health, Asian Human Services Family Health Center, and Swedish Covenant Hospital. They are donating a total of nearly 100 screenings for the launch. The potential to expand and scale this model across the state will reach 6,000 a year.

The portal will be unveiled Friday, May 12, 2017, at the Midwest Health Equity Conference in Chicago. The conference brings together community and health professionals who are focused on preventing hepatitis, liver cancer and colorectal cancer among minority populations.

In its initial stages, Illinois Colon CARES (Colorectal Cancer Alliance to Reinforce and Enhance Screening) will target uninsured and vulnerable populations who are most at risk for developing the disease. The Center for Asian Health Equity (CAHE), which received a \$3.5 million federal grant to increase [colorectal cancer screening](#) rates in Cook County, wants to bring the technology to other communities across the country.

"If we find colon cancer early, nine out of 10 people will have a long-term survival and can be cured from the disease," said Karen Kim, MD, professor of medicine and director of CAHE, a partnership between UChicago Medicine and the Asian Health Coalition. "Unfortunately, about 40 percent of people diagnosed with colon cancer are found in late stages when the survival rate is very low. This is a disease that needs special attention because we can prevent it with screening."

Fewer than half of Illinois residents who should be screened for colorectal cancer have access to such services. The tragedy of this situation is that, unlike most cancers, colorectal cancer often starts as a benign growth that can be identified and removed during screening, before [cancer](#) forms.

Most federally funded health clinics provide screening to patients. However, when there is a positive result, it is very difficult to access timely and high-quality colonoscopy follow-up. Illinois Colon CARES was developed to address this gap in services, especially for vulnerable populations who are at high risk for [colorectal cancer](#). "Federally qualified [health centers](#) are faced with challenges in communicating with hospital systems that do not shared similar electronic medical record

platforms," Kim said.

This portal creates a process to eliminate these gaps in needed services and follow-up care by partnering with hospitals to donate colonoscopy services for use by health centers through a single accessible, online portal.

"The beauty of Illinois Colon CARES is the broad partnership and win-win-win situation. Hospitals provide community benefit to their surrounding community, federally qualified health centers have access to needed services and the community gets screened," Kim said.

Kim said she hopes the effort will eventually provide access to care for vulnerable populations in every state. She has already introduced the model to colleagues across the nation, including Dennis Ahnen, MD, professor of medicine at the University of Colorado, Denver, and steering committee member of the National Colorectal Cancer Roundtable.

"The Illinois Colon CARES website is both novel and an elegant way to bring hospitals and practices who wanted to reach out to the community to a population in need of that outreach," said Ahnen. "The website and the work behind it have made it easy for the hospitals and the clinics taking care of the population in need to get colonoscopies completed and provides a simple and consistent source of donated colonoscopies."

Provided by University of Chicago Medical Center

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