

St. Maarten to sharpen cancer advocacy skills

By Judy Fitzpatrick

St. Maarten is expected for February 14 - 20. to learn techniques on how to empower patients to become advocates for supportive cancer prevention programmes, such as regulated screening, at a Cancer Advocacy Event scheduled

The event is being organized by the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), Pink Ribbon Foundation of Suriname, Positive Foundation and the Ministry of Public Health's Collective Prevention

Services (CPS). It is being held in observance of Cancer Awareness Month this month. February 4 was also World Cancer Day. Participants of the event will include representatives of cancer societies and foundations in St. Maarten.



Suriname's Pink Ribbon Foundation President Karin Refos will be a special guest for event.

The event is geared towards promoting the development of civil society networks, increasing media involvement, giving information sessions to youth, sharing best practices between Pink Ribbon and Positive Foundation and strengthening advocacy capacity around cancer prevention and treatment between St. Maarten's and Suriname's non-governmental organisations. Participating NGOs will discuss the critical value of an empowered patient who can advocate supportive programmes. The event will feature activities such as presentations, facilitated dialogue and discussions and courtesy visits to government officials.

The event is expected to result in a proposal to HCC, with marketing ideas for the promotion of cancer awareness and prevention. During the event a visit will be made to at least one high school, where information will

be provided. Presentations will also be made to Rotary Club of St. Maarten Sunrise, Rotary Club Mid Isle and Rotary Club of St. Maarten to expand advocacy capacity.

HCC Director Dr. Virginia Asin-Ootsburg said the information sessions with the Rotary Clubs were very important. The intention is not to "dictate" to them, but rather to "make them aware of their advocacy role and aware of the role they can play to strengthen and promote" the message of early detection. "We need make people understand how important it is to screen," she stressed. Several radio and television interviews and newspaper articles are also planned.

Refos will also pay a courtesy call on Health Minister Cornelius de Weever and meet with American University of the Caribbean (AUC) School of Medicine and CPS representatives. An e-meeting will also be held with HCC Directors.

Asked how this event will benefit the average woman and man in the street, Positive Foundation President Shelly Alphonso said the country is expected to learn techniques on how to empower patients to become advocates for supportive cancer prevention programmes such as regulated screening. For example, giving persons notification at age 40 that they must get their first mammogram and making an appointment for them to get it done.

Exchanging best practices between the two organisations may also lead to larger and more impactful awareness campaigns, getting the "early detection" message to members of the community the cancer awareness groups have not (yet) been able to reach.

Asin-Ootsburg and Alphonso were among the many persons who played key roles in organising this event. Sponsors include Positive Foundation, Pink Ribbon Foundation Suriname, the government

detailed report of the visit with supporting pictures will be submitted to HCC following the event.

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition was formed in 2008. It is a live network of non-governmental and civil society organisations from across the Caribbean Region that has a remit to address non-communicable disease (NCDs). As a result of a Heads of Government Summit of Caribbean Leaders, the Caribbean Development Bank supported a conference to address NCDs in the Caribbean region and this was the starting point for HCC.

With little funding, the HCC has grown into a formal network over the last four years. It effectively shares information though a Website and opportunistically meetings at NCD-related regional events. The HCC has more recently developed a strategic plan with strategic areas of advocacy: Enhancing Communication; Capacity Building; and Promoting m-health and e-health, which will inform its functioning over the next four years.

HCC's mission is to harness the power of civil society, in collaboration with government, private enterprise, academia and international partners, as appropriate, in the development and implementation of plans for the prevention and management of chronic diseases among Caribbean people. Its vision is the reduction of death and disability from chronic diseases among people in the Caribbean.

The HCC works closely with regional and international leaders in NCD prevention to leverage the power of civil society by strengthening and supporting membership in the implementation of programmes, aimed at reducing the morbidity and

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