



THE
**HARKIN ON
WELLNESS** 2026
SYMPOSIUM 26
The Treatment and Prevention of Cancer



Acknowledgments

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Our work on Environmental Risk Factors and Cancer has benefited greatly from our close partnerships with the Iowa Environmental Council and Iowa Farmers Union, as well as from collaborations with UNI's Center for Energy and Environmental Education, the Environmental Law and Policy Center, Food and Water Watch Iowa, Progress Iowa, Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, the Iowa Food System Coalition, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Jefferson County Farmers and Neighbors, the Polk County Health Department, Polk County, The Iowa Cancer Registry, the Drake Office of Sustainability, Drake Environmental Action League, The Hubbell Environmental Law Initiative, and Johns Hopkins Center for a Liveable Future.

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Finally, we would also like to express our immense and eternal gratitude to Patsy Shors, Fred Weitz, and Buz Brenton for investing in an investigation into cancer in Iowa that has already dramatically changed the conversation for the better.

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Agenda

Wednesday, April 11, 2026

Parents Hall, Olmsted Center at Drake University, Des Moines, IA

9:00 a.m.

Opening Remarks

9:10 a.m.

Morning Keynote

Dr. Ricardo Salvador, co-founder and board member of the HEAL Food Alliance
Introduction by **Senator Tom Harkin (retired)**

10:10 a.m.

Panel 1: Where We're At: The Battle Against Cancer in 2026

Moderated by Provost Dr. Sue Mattison, Drake University
Dr. Richard Deming, Oncologist and Medical Director of the MercyOne Richard Deming Cancer Center

Dr. Greg Kennedy, Unity Point Health Chief Medical Officer-Oncology Service Line
Joe Garcia, Aflac Regional Vice President for the Northwestern Region
Jean McGinnis, Physician Assistant-Certified, clinician and educator

11:30 a.m.

Lunch Break

12:20 p.m.

Afternoon Keynote

Dr. Jesse Bell, Claire M. Hubbard Professor of Water, Climate and Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center
Introduction by **Audrey Tran Lam**, Environmental Health Program Director at the University of Northern Iowa

1:20 p.m.

Designee Awards and Presentations

2:40 p.m.

Panel 2: Reporting on the Drinking Water and Cancer Crises in Iowa

Moderated by Jason Clayworth, Reporter at Axios Des Moines
Nina B. Elkadi, Editor-at-Large for Sentient Media
Carey Gillam, Managing editor of the New Lede and contributor for The Guardian
Dan Keating, Staff writer at The Washington Post

4:00 p.m.

An Update on the Cancer and Environmental Risk Factors Report in collaboration with the Iowa Environmental Council

Foreword

By Senator Tom Harkin

Science shows us a clear link between the health of our environment and the health of our bodies. When the toxins in our drinking water are at record highs; our air is polluted with smoke from forest fires thousands of miles away; and food deserts make healthy eating options less accessible, our bodies also pay a price.

We can see this public health crisis in real time. Iowa leads the nation in nitrate levels and we have the second highest rate of cancer diagnoses in the country.

The theme of this year's symposium, "The Treatment and Prevention of Cancer," builds on this connection while highlighting solutions for preventing disease through environmental wellness and lifestyle medicine.

Introduction

The health of our communities is a shared responsibility. It requires partnerships and sustainable, cross-sector coalitions focused on improving public health. "The Treatment and Prevention of Cancer," report is a showcase of creative work from nonprofit organizations, healthcare providers, and environmental groups addressing the emerging link between pollutants and cancer while promoting healthy practices.

While there are many environmental and lifestyle risk factors that can cause cancer, our research and listening sessions with the Iowa Environmental Council give us a clearer look at the close connection between decreasing water quality and rising cancer rates.

These programs serve as effective examples of how environmental and lifestyle initiatives can improve our overall public health: increasing access to early cancer screenings and affordable preventative care, providing

The fight against cancer affects nearly every family in this country. While advancements in clinical care and screenings have saved countless lives, we need a more comprehensive approach to wellness to tackle the environmental and lifestyle factors that put people more at risk of developing the disease.

It will take a collective effort among government and industry leaders, medical and research professionals, and an engaged public to identify the true risks we're facing and come up with solutions that work for everyone. As we confront the ongoing threats of environmental risk factors and the complexities of modern health care, I hope the initiatives outlined in this report will serve as groundwork for policies and programs that improve our public and environmental health.

Senator Tom Harkin (retired)

Tom Harkin

nutritional meals for cancer patients and caregivers, building enrichment camps for patients and families to experience the value of nature and fellowship, and creating recovery programs to improve patients' mental and emotional health. The discussions at the Symposium will explore the full spectrum of cancer care today, including lifestyle and clinical interventions and medicines, the latest progress in cancer research, and prevention strategies.



Photo courtesy of CEN - Project Reach & the Environmental Justice Summit Series

Methodology

In the Fall of 2025, we began the search for top wellness and nutrition initiatives related to the 2026 theme. The call for submissions was distributed nationwide through professional organizations, public agencies, and more. We asked that all submissions highlight how their initiative or program is working to improve the treatment and/or prevention of cancer. We received numerous submissions from across the country which were reviewed by a committee to narrow down the applicant field.

Submissions were rated based on relevancy, adaptability, value alignment, measurable outcomes, and reach, and were checked for inter-rater agreement.

Based on the evaluation from the committee, we choose to highlight groups that were directly addressing cancer treatment in Iowa as well as several national organizations using innovative techniques. A total of ten programs were selected as innovative examples that highlight a range of approaches for making a difference.



2026 Harkin On Wellness Designees

1. **John Stoddard Cancer Center | Meals That Matter and Meals That Matter at Home**
- *Des Moines, Iowa*
2. **Above + Beyond Cancer** - *West Des Moines, Iowa*
3. **Faces of Courage Foundation** - *Tampa, Florida*
4. **Cancer Screen Iowa** - *Johnston, Iowa*
5. **Helen G. Nassif Community Cancer Center** - *Cedar Rapids, Iowa*
6. **Iowa Cancer Consortium** - *North Liberty, Iowa*
7. **Cancer and Environment Network of Southwestern Pennsylvania (CEN) - Project REACH & The Environmental Justice Summit Series** - *Coraopolis, Pennsylvania*
8. **OurWaters & OurSoils (OWOS) – Integrated Nutrient, Organic Load, and Environmental Exposure Reduction Program for Cancer Prevention** - *Urbandale, Iowa*
9. **Polk County Health Department - Ribbons of Hope** - *Des Moines, Iowa*
10. **BlueprintNav** - *West Des Moines, Iowa*

John Stoddard Cancer Center | Meals That Matter and Meals That Matter at Home

The John Stoddard Cancer Center launched Meals that Matter in 2020 to help reduce hunger and increase access to quick, ready-made, nutritionally dense meals that are free of cost for patients and their caregivers. Recognizing the vital role nutrition plays in treatment and recovery, Meals That Matter provides healthy, balanced meals twice a week to patients receiving cancer care, easing both nutritional and financial strain during one of life's most difficult times.



Photo courtesy of the John Stoddard Cancer Center Meals that Matter

Building on this success, Stoddard Cancer Center expanded Meals That Matter statewide and delivers fresh meals directly to patients' homes, reaching rural and underserved Iowans who may have limited access to healthy food options.

Each meal includes a main dish, fruit, and soup. Meals That Matter also offers cooking videos, hosted by Stoddard Cancer Center's oncology dietitian, intended to empower patients and caregivers to recreate nutritious meals at home during and long after treatment. Since its launch, Meals That Matter has provided more than 25,000 meals to patients and caregivers from 67 Iowa counties. With statewide delivery available, Meals That Matter can serve patients wherever they live, removing geographic barriers.

This program expects to serve more patients and families through meals and online learning resources to emphasize sustainable, healthy eating habits beyond cancer treatment.

Meals That Matter is funded 100 percent through philanthropy. Continued community and donor support directly advances cancer patients' healing journeys. By combining meal delivery with nutrition education, this program not only nourishes patients today but also empowers them with tools for lifelong wellness. As Iowa continues to face one of the nation's highest cancer rates, Meals That Matter demonstrates a compassionate, innovative approach to improving outcomes for patients across the state.

Above + Beyond Cancer

The mission at Above + Beyond Cancer is to elevate the mind, body, and spirit of patients, survivors, and caregivers throughout the cancer journey. Founded in 2011 by Des Moines oncologist Dr. Richard Deming, Above + Beyond Cancer provides evidence-based, free programs for cancer survivors and the community that promote recovery and prevention through a variety of programs.



Photo courtesy of Above + Beyond Cancer

These programs include an Optimal Living Program, Hotel Program, and Transformation Journey. Through these initiatives, Above + Beyond Cancer offers free

fitness, yoga, meditation, cycling, personalized plans, nutrition classes, urban pole walking, outdoor adventures, a book club, a cancer education series, free hotel rooms to qualifying individuals, and planned hiking adventures.



Photo courtesy of Above + Beyond Cancer

Each year, Above + Beyond Cancer leads cancer survivors and caregivers on incredible transformational journeys, visiting places like Mount Everest Base Camp, Machu Picchu, Utah, the Appalachian Trail, Patagonia, and the top of Mount Kilimanjaro. The journeys provide an opportunity to experience spiritual sites, local traditions, and awe-inspiring landscapes that will challenge your body, expand your spirit, and leave you forever changed.



Photo courtesy of Above + Beyond Cancer

53 percent of people would not have been able to access treatment if it were not for the hotel program. One participant shared, "I cannot thank Above + Beyond Cancer enough for helping me with lodging. I have to drive almost 4 1/2 hours to receive treatment, which means I need to go the day before treatment, as my appointments are always early in the morning. I would have had to leave home by 2 a.m. to be able to make my treatment and appointments!"

Faces of Courage Foundation

With more than 1,600 volunteers and partnerships with leading hospitals, universities, and community organizations, Faces of Courage has delivered more than 14,000 unforgettable experiences at no cost to families. The programs foster empowerment, reduce isolation, and improve emotional well-being for those who need it most.



Photo courtesy of Faces of Courage

Faces of Courage Foundation provides free, medically supervised overnight camps, day outings, and educational workshops for children, adults, and families facing any type of cancer or blood disorder. The signature programs bring together survivors, patients, and their siblings to create a safe community filled with support, friendship, and fun.

Faces of Courage Foundation also provides year-round educational workshops focused on early detection, healthy living, emotional wellness, and practical tools that help families navigate treatment. The foundation's

culturally relevant programming, including the nation's first Women of Color cancer camp, breaks down barriers to care, and ensures prevention information reaches underserved communities.



Photo courtesy of Faces of Courage

The foundation's reach is strengthened by the breadth of programming, including, but not limited to, canoeing, kayaking, hiking, zip-lining, museum experiences, Virtual EduCare sessions, Breast Cancer Tips and Tricks books, and virtual art classes. All programs, books, and virtual classes are provided at no cost, easing the financial burden for families already facing high medical expenses. Overall, Faces of Courage provides life-changing emotional, educational, and practical support that enhances the quality of life for thousands of cancer patients, survivors, and families.

Cancer Screen Iowa

Cancer Screen Iowa is a statewide public-private initiative designed to raise screening rates for breast, prostate, lung, colorectal, and cervical cancer by increasing awareness, removing cost barriers, and expanding access. Cancer Screen Iowa is focused on improving cancer prevention by building a statewide early-detection effort that makes screening more accessible and easier to complete.

As part of this work, cancer screening has been incorporated into Iowa's Rural Health Transformation grant proposal, emphasizing its strategy for

strengthening rural health and catching cancer earlier across the state. By improving screening rates by just a few percentage points annually, the program can drive tens of thousands of additional screenings, detect hundreds of cancers earlier, and reduce long-term mortality statewide. This will create a model that Cancer Screen Iowa hopes other states replicate to achieve a similar impact.



Photo courtesy of Cancer Screen Iowa

Early detection leads to more satisfactory health outcomes, with patients having a higher chance of survival and needing far less intensive treatment when cancer is caught early. It also lowers overall healthcare costs because treating early-stage cancer is dramatically cheaper than late-stage care. Beyond the numbers, improving screening rates helps families avoid the hardship of late diagnoses and strengthens community trust in preventive care, especially in rural areas where access has historically been limited.

Helen G. Nassif Community Cancer Center

The Nassif Community Cancer Center (CCC) was established in 2011 to provide coordinated treatment and support services to cancer patients in Eastern Iowa. It offers a full spectrum of services from prevention and education to cutting-edge clinical programs, treatment options, and clinical research.

The CCC diagnoses more than 1,100 patients each year (1,156 patients in 2024) and schedules over 9,000 patient visits annually to use the CCC services.

The CCC support services address patients' physical, psychosocial, and spiritual health, offering services to patients, caregivers, and survivors.



Photo courtesy of the Helen G. Nassif Community Cancer Center

These services are free of charge, regardless of when or where the initial cancer treatments occurred. The CCC offers group/individual exercise classes, an on-staff dietitian, skin care education, mental health counseling, family care programs, wig vouchers and fittings, and art and horticulture sessions.



Photo courtesy of the Helen G. Nassif Community Cancer Center

Another way the CCC stays committed to supporting patients' access to care is the Spirit Fund. The Spirit Fund is supported entirely through donations secured by the St. Luke's Foundation and was established to provide direct financial relief for low-income patients with a cancer diagnosis. Patients may receive up to \$500 in gift card support to cover essentials such as food, fuel, or medical supplies.

As part of a shared commitment to the community, the CCC, in partnership with St. Luke's Foundation, has developed a presentation to educate the public on cancer prevention, early detection, and resources available within the community. This Education Program is available to any group, organization, or business interested in learning more about reducing cancer risk.

Iowa Cancer Consortium

To support communities across the state, the 2023-2027 Iowa Cancer Plan was created to provide direction and support for those who want to work collectively to reduce the burden of cancer.



Image courtesy of the Iowa Cancer Consortium

The plan encompasses the entire cancer control continuum, including actions to reduce the risk of developing cancer or finding cancer early, all the way through treatment and survivorship care. The Iowa Cancer Plan is intended for use by all cancer control professionals throughout the state, including health care providers and administrators, public health professionals, academics, representatives of community, nonprofit, and advocacy organizations, volunteers, and many others.

All Iowans have a unique role in reducing the state's cancer burden. Together with its partners, the Iowa Cancer Consortium maintains the Iowa Cancer Plan, serving as a roadmap for comprehensive cancer control efforts in Iowa for the next five years. It is meant to help provide direction and guide all Iowans involved in cancer to work together towards accomplishing similar goals.

Each section includes priorities, strategies, and specific action steps. The plan has been utilized by both state and national partners to identify strategies and action steps to reduce the burden of cancer in their communities. Notably, the Iowa Cancer Plan is being used by county agencies attending the 99 Counties Project meetings from the Iowa Cancer Registry, as a way to engage and provide a framework for community discussions.

Cancer and Environment Network of Southwestern Pennsylvania (CEN) – Project REACH & The Environmental Justice Summit Series

CEN is a collaborative network of more than 50 organizations bridging the gap between scientific research and community action to reduce environmental carcinogens.

Project REACH is a new digital initiative designed to advance environmental health equity by translating scientific research into accessible tools for community action. Project REACH includes an informative toolkit, short-form videos explaining complex environmental topics, and webinars to increase scientific literacy.



Photo courtesy of CEN - Project REACH & The Environmental Justice Summit Series

CEN is dedicated to primary prevention: eliminating the environmental exposures that cause cancer in the first place. Moving beyond individual lifestyle factors, the CEN has built a powerful, cross-sector

movement to address the involuntary environmental exposures, such as air pollution, toxic chemicals in our household products, and water contaminants that disproportionately burden our communities.

CEN bridges the gap between science and the public by translating complex environmental health studies into accessible, actionable tools that equip communities to advocate for their own safety. Through persistent advocacy within the Pennsylvania Department of Health, CEN secured the inclusion of environmental carcinogens in the state's Cancer Control Plan for the first time in history. This victory ensures that reducing environmental risk factors is now a formal, state-mandated objective.



Photo courtesy of CEN - Project REACH & The Environmental Justice Summit Series

OurWaters & OurSoils (OWOS) – Integrated Nutrient, Organic Load, and Environmental Exposure Reduction Program for Cancer Prevention

OWOS is a collaborative, multi-company platform delivering Nature-based Solutions (NbS) to reduce environmental contaminants associated with increased cancer risk. OWOS combines technologies into treatment trains designed to protect public health by intervening early, before carcinogenic pathways emerge in drinking water systems, private wells, recreational lakes, and downstream utility infrastructure.



Photo courtesy of OWOS – Integrated Nutrient, Organic Load, and Environmental Exposure Reduction Program for Cancer Prevention

OWOS improves cancer prevention by removing or reducing contaminants linked to carcinogenic mechanisms. One example of how OWOS enforces contaminant reduction is through intercepting nitrates from stormwater, tile drainage, agricultural runoff, and urban corridors before they reach drinking water sources. In addition, OWOS integrates six synergistic solution lines: Flo-Water, AquaFlex, BioFlex, Natura Solve, 42Biochar (Biochar Platform), and BioStar (Chitosan & Treatment Enhancements).



Photo courtesy of OWOS – Integrated Nutrient, Organic Load, and Environmental Exposure Reduction Program for Cancer Prevention

There are more than 5 million residents across regions where OWOS systems are deployed or integrated into engineering specs, which has a significant impact on our communities. OWOS uniquely blends engineering, environmental health, biology, and public policy to

deliver real-world cancer prevention benefits through water-quality protection.

Polk County Health Department - Ribbons of Hope

Ribbons of Hope is the Polk County Health Department's cancer prevention and screening program, providing free cancer screenings and patient navigation services to hundreds of uninsured and underinsured residents each year.



Photo courtesy of Ribbons of Hope

In fiscal year 2024 alone, the program served more than 1,800 individuals. This program helps detect cancer earlier, reduces barriers to care, and connects people to life-saving treatment and support resources. The program offers screenings for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers.

In addition to screenings, Ribbons of Hope places a strong emphasis on education. The program provides one-on-one guidance and community presentations to help people understand cancer risk factors, the importance of regular screening, and what to expect during diagnosis and treatment.

By having this team and program, Ribbons of Hope also improves continuity of care, helping to reduce missed appointments for individuals who are facing other social barriers. Together, these efforts are helping reduce disparities and improve cancer outcomes across Polk County. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how Ribbons of Hope not only improves cancer prevention and treatment, but also reduces financial

strain, strengthens social support systems, and advances health equity for families in Polk County and surrounding counties.



Photo courtesy of Ribbons of Hope

BlueprintNav

BlueprintNav is an Iowa-based healthcare technology company developing a digital Patient Navigation Enablement Platform. This platform is designed to strengthen cancer care coordination, continuity of care, and patient support by enabling the health system navigators' care pathways following diagnosis.

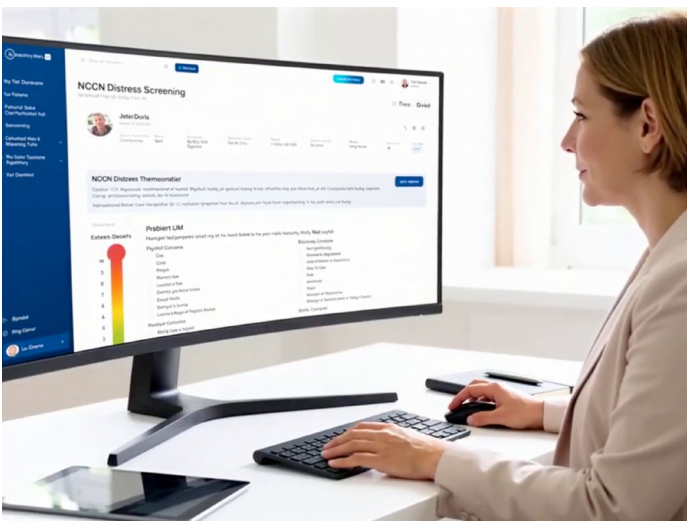


Photo courtesy of BlueprintNav

The platform is launching with an intentional focus on oncology, and is actively working toward trial agreements with Iowa-based organizations. Health systems also

frequently lack visibility into most navigation activities, making it difficult to evaluate performance, support staff, or justify program expansion. These challenges are especially pronounced in community cancer centers and rural settings. BlueprintNav's platform is purpose-built to address these gaps by enabling consistent navigation workflows, secure communication, standardized documentation, and real-time visibility into navigator workload and patient progress.

Beginning in early 2026, BlueprintNav will be deployed within multiple health systems to support navigators working with oncology patients from diagnosis through active treatment and survivorship. These deployments are designed to reduce missed appointments and care delays, improve coordination across care teams, and help ensure patients and caregivers receive clear guidance and support throughout the cancer care journey.



Photo courtesy of BlueprintNav

Operational studies and early pilot insights indicate that navigation teams often spend a disproportionate amount of time on coordination and documentation rather than direct patient support, contributing to burnout and high turnover. BlueprintNav is designed to address these challenges by standardizing workflows, improving efficiency, and providing actionable data to support program oversight, workforce sustainability, and quality improvement. BlueprintNav has an Iowa-based pilot planned and remains committed to additional Iowa and rural deployments.

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Photo above courtesy of Cancer and Environment Network of Southwestern Pennsylvania - Project REACH & The Environmental Justice Summit Series

Photo on front courtesy of the Helen G. Nassif Community Cancer Center

About the Harkin on Wellness Symposium

The Harkin on Wellness (HOW) Symposium is an annual gathering to discuss timely topics associated with wellness and nutrition. Each year, the HOW Symposium gathers practitioners, policymakers, students, educators, and members of the public for an engaging and educational event.

The Harkin Institute and Drake University

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement serves as a venue and catalyst for dynamic non-partisan research, learning, and outreach to promote understanding of the policy issues to which Senator Tom Harkin devoted his career.

The Harkin Institute is located at Drake University. Established in 1881, Drake is recognized as one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the Midwest. A mid-sized private university in Des Moines, Iowa, Drake offers the benefits and resources of a larger institution along with the advantages of intimate class sizes and close personal relationships.

Drake's mission is to provide an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Our inspiration is that together we transform lives and strengthen communities.