

Florida Jewish Journal

Battling breast cancer Congresswomen sponsor bill to fight disease

By Shani McManus

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In the Jewish community, one in 40 Jewish women of Ashkenazi descent carry the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene and are three to seven times more likely to develop breast cancer, often before the age of 50.

That statistic changes to one in 345 women within the general population.

During a teleconference with Jewish leaders from across the country, UJC/Jewish Federations of North America last week kicked off an online petition campaign to support the Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young (EARLY) Act, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Shultz -- D-FL -- and Senator Amy Klobuchar -- D-Minn.

The EARLY Act directs the Centers for Disease Control to develop and implement a national education campaign about the threat breast cancer poses to young women of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and the heightened risks certain groups face. The legislation would also seek to inform medical professionals about the distinct risk factors and treatments, including infertility and recurring malignancies, specific to young women under 40. Rep. Wasserman Schultz is the author and House sponsor of the legislation, which Sen. Klobuchar introduced in the Senate. Both Congresswomen took part in the teleconference to discuss the proposed legislation, which is expected to be signed by President Obama in late October. "This is Debbie's bill, and I was honored that she asked me to be the Senate sponsor," Klobuchar said. "Debbie has done an amazing job in getting support for this bill."

Wasserman Schultz said her battle with breast cancer last year was the impetus behind the EARLY Act. "I won my battle against cancer and I am now cancer free," she said. "I was determined to make sure that other young women knew their risks for breast cancer, especially young Jewish women, because Jewish women are five times more likely to be carriers of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation, which makes us more likely to get breast cancer over our lifetime."

Wasserman Schultz noted that while not all women who carry the altered gene will develop breast cancer, recent studies suggest there could be as high as an 82 percent risk. Moreover, there are other issues for Jewish women with breast cancer, particularly for religious women, such as wearing a hat or wig during chemotherapy as a single woman. Another concern might be issues about fertility as a member of a culture whose traditions emphasize the importance of family. "The idea of the EARLY Act is that we should help ease some of these worries by empowering young women of all faiths to learn the facts; know their bodies; speak up for their health and embrace support," she said.



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Plantation resident Sandi Sirotowitz, outreach coordinator for Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered (FORCE) in South Florida supports the legislation.

"My history is typical of one in every 40 Jewish Ashkenazi families. My family had generations of women with breast and ovarian cancer Both men and women can carry this mutation and that means that both mothers and fathers can pass it on to their children," she said.

"I was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 56 and found out my BRCA status at age 57," she added. I was devastated especially about what this meant for my daughter and two young, wonderful granddaughters. I didn't know where to turn, then found Dr. Sue Friedman, a former veterinarian from Coral Springs, Florida, breast and cancer survivor and founder of Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered (FORCE). It was a great relief not to feel alone."

Elana Silber, director of operations for Sharsheret, a national organization dedicated to addressing the unique concerns of young Jewish women facing breast cancer, also supports the bill.

"We applaud Rep. Wasserman Schultz for bringing much needed attention to the critical concerns of young women at risk of developing breast cancer," she said. "For Ashkenazi Jewish women, who have an increased genetic susceptibility to breast cancer, the education and support initiatives proposed in the EARLY Act are critical."

In Palm Beach County, Ellen Hodges, co-chair of the Florida Atlantic Region of Hadassah's "CHECK IT OUT" program, designed to teach high school students to take care of their own bodies and have good health habits, urges the community to support the EARLY Act.

"After serving as co-chair of "CHECK IT OUT" for six years, I strongly believe it is vitally important to reach as many women as possible at an early age to save lives," she said. "The Early Act Bill for National Education before Congress must be passed for the future of the younger generation."

For more information on the EARLY Act and the UJC/Jewish Federation petition drive, visit: www.ujc.org/washington. For more information on FORCE, visit: www.facingourrisk.org. For more information on Sharsheret, call 866-474-2774 or visit: www.sharsheret.org. For more information on "CHECK IT OUT," call 561-498-1012.

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