

House Energy and Commerce Committee, Subcommittee on Health, Hearing on “Enhancing Public Health: Legislation to Protect Children and Families

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

Statement by Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz

On July 21, Congressman Fred Upton and I reintroduced the Protecting Access to Lifesaving Screenings (PALS) Act to protect access to mammograms for women ages 40-49 and I am especially appreciative that the Energy and Commerce Committee, Subcommittee on Health, has included this lifesaving screening bill among the important public health bills you will hear about today.

This seems especially relevant since October is breast cancer awareness month, but even more so this year since breast cancer screening rates, like most preventive health screening, have fallen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The declines reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were especially steep among Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native women. But as we work to urge women to “catch-up” on their screenings, we must acknowledge that low breast cancer screening rates existed before the pandemic, notably among Black women. We know we can do better, particularly since there are proven methods of early detection, such as 3D mammography, which allow for detection in earlier stages, but only if women are screened.

Federal preventive screening guidelines are critically important to coverage and therefore access to early cancer detection, but these guidelines can miss their mark when their evidence does not capture the clinical data for all women in the U.S. In 2009 and again in 2015, the United States Preventive Service Task Force (USPSTF) gave annual mammograms for women ages 40-49 a “C” grade, meaning regular screenings are not recommended for that age group. These recommendations drew largely on a study of Canadian women, failing to be representative when diversity of research most matters and failing to reflect the diversity in the United States.

To elaborate, in a statement last year regarding the importance of early detection, Linda Blount, President and CEO of the Black Women’s Health Imperative, stated:

“Consider that 30% of all breast cancers in Black women occur under the age of 50 and 18% occur under the age of 45. The CDC projects that for the year 2020, roughly 30,000 breast cancer will be diagnosed in women under 45, and 5,000 among Black women under 45. If we just increased the rate of screening mammography by 50% among women 45 and under, the survival rate could include an additional 3,000 women every year.”

This concern about evidence and the resulting screening guidelines is not limited to Black women. The need for earlier screening and diagnosis is higher for women with inherited mutations associated with increased risk of cancer, such as the BRCA genes, Ashkenazi Jewish, Latina women, and women who were treated with radiation therapy for cancer as a child or young adult.

The research and data we based these guidelines on matters, and it is why the PALS Act is so important, because until we can count on more timely and diverse breast cancer screening research, then we need to protect the breast cancer screening guidelines to ensure access for women 40-49. Originally enacted in 2015, the PALS Act will extend the protection for another five years, allowing the USPSTF to bring greater diversity in its evidence process. Because of the PALS Act, over 20 million women annually between the ages of 40-49 have had access to breast cancer screening giving them the best chance to help prevent, detect, and enable early treatment of this dreadful disease.

I urge your support and thank you!