

# Researcher works to remove barriers to breast cancer screening for women with physical disabilities

By Jill Pease

**W**omen with physical disabilities have the same or greater risk of developing breast cancer as other women, but behavioral and environmental barriers can contribute to lower rates of breast cancer screening for women with disabilities.

Ellen Lopez, M.P.H., Ph.D., an assistant professor in the UF College of Public Health and Health Professions' department of behavioral science and community health, is working to understand these challenges by examining the facilitators and barriers to proper breast cancer screening for women with physical disabilities. Her work is funded by a new \$230,000 Special Population Grant from the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

"Personal attitudes and beliefs, along with environmental obstacles such as inaccessible health-care facilities, put women with disabilities at risk for late breast

cancer diagnosis and poor health outcomes," Lopez said.

One major deterrent for breast cancer screening is a lack of referral.

"Factors impacting health-care providers performing or recommending screening for their patients with disabilities are as complex as those factors impacting women," Lopez said. "For example, the disability itself can pose a barrier to those providers for whom the disability becomes the sole focus of their patient/provider interaction."

In partnership with the Center for Independent Living of North Central Florida, Lopez and her research team, which includes Elena Andresen, Jill Castina, Eva Egensteiner, Lisa Hannold, William Kennedy, Melissa Lanzone and Vijay Vasudevan, will conduct in-depth interviews with 30 women with disabilities and 30 health-care providers to learn their perspective on cancer screening facilitators and barriers.

Additionally, six women will be given digital cameras to take photographs during a health-care visit. This approach draws from an innovative research method, known as Photovoice, to give participants an opportunity to visually document and share their experiences with researchers.

"The women will be able to take photographs that literally 'show and tell' the things that make seeking and receiving breast cancer screening easy or difficult during an actual health-care visit," Lopez said.

Study results will be shared at interactive forums with the women and health providers who participated in the research.

"This research is just the first step in identifying issues that are important to women with disabilities, and it will set the stage for women in the community to be involved in the research as partners, not just participants," Lopez said. **P**

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