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New LIVESTRONG Center in E. Austin to help access cancer care



Since the nonprofit [LIVESTRONG](#) moved to East Austin two years ago, President and CEO Doug Ulman and Chairman and Founder Lance Armstrong have talked about wanting to help the historically underserved area.

LIVESTRONG, formerly the [Lance Armstrong Foundation](#), will do that when it launches [The LIVESTRONG Center](#), a pilot program aimed at helping low-income East Austinites fight cancer and navigate the health care system. The center, expected to open in the next few months with Chris Dammert as general manager, will provide face-to-face services, including financial and psychological counseling and practical life management, such as transportation and arranging child care.

The free program seeks to reduce the mortality rate for cancer patients living in East Austin, which is significantly higher than in Austin's more affluent areas, Ulman said.

Low-income and uninsured individuals typically face barriers, such as language or a lack of knowledge about the medical system, that make access to health care more difficult.

The **LIVESTRONG** Center is based on the model of [The Harold P. Freeman Institute](#) for Patient Navigation, whose goal is to reduce disparities in access to cancer diagnosis and treatment among the poor and uninsured in New York's Harlem neighborhood. Dr. Harold P. Freeman, founder of the institute, is on **LIVESTRONG's** board.

Ulman and Armstrong spent time in Harlem studying Freeman's patient navigation model, which has helped reduce the mortality rate among the most vulnerable residents there. Observing that program's success prompted them to replicate the model here, beginning in East Austin and taking it to other communities later, Ulman said.

“We are going to take our time and learn. We’ll be able to shape our programs based on the needs of the community,” he said.

How it will work

The **LIVESTRONG** Center will start with seven oncology social workers, called navigators, who will each handle about 40 clients. Each navigator will focus on a particular area, such as financial issues, clinical trials or practical issues.

“The financial navigator will know every local, state and federally funded program, and will know how to navigate that world of health insurance,” Ulman said, adding that the patient navigators will be able to help patients access available funding from under-utilized government sources, such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

“Not only do you save lives and get people screened, but you [will] also have the financial benefit to Central Texas,” Ulman said.

Each navigator’s goal will be to solve clients’ issues regardless of how long it takes, Ulman said. The **LIVESTRONG** Center occupies about 1,800 square feet at the nonprofit’s headquarters on East Sixth Street. The model is intentionally small so that it can be replicated easily and cheaply in a retail shopping center or similar building.

“We are always thinking of what’s next and how we can do it in other markets, but we are very cautious,” Ulman said. “This is something new for us, and we really have to measure the impact.”

Patient navigation isn’t new to Austin. The [American Cancer Society](#) has provided such services in Austin and surrounding areas. The Cancer Society served about 1,500 patients last year, most of whom were referred by health care providers and contacted it by phone, said Sandra Villalaz, community manager for health initiatives.

Villalaz said gaining the East Austin community’s trust will be key to making Livestrong’s program successful.

Dammert said the center is committed to building trust and is “talking to leaders and care providers to understand the needs of the people we hope to serve.”

One factor making The **LIVESTRONG** Center and other programs possible is that the nonprofit has enjoyed strong financial support from donors, as well as strong sales of **LIVESTRONG** -branded products. Its fundraising was up 25 percent year-over-year, and its budget is more than \$40 million this year.

The **LIVESTRONG** Center pilot program has been underwritten by a few Austin philanthropists, Ulman said.