

A Week to Remember

(Congressional Cancer Advocacy)

All of us at some point in our lifetime will be affected or have a loved one with a form of cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute, “approximately 39.5% of men and women will be diagnosed with cancer at some point during their lifetime.” Furthermore, 17,000 children and adolescents ages 0-19 will be diagnosed with cancer; and 1,800 will die of the disease each year in the United States.

Over the past year, I became involved with a national cancer advocacy group, Hope for Stomach Cancer. Gastric (stomach) cancer is the 3rd deadliest cancer in the world and the 6th most common; yet it only receives 2% of the federal cancer research funding. There are approximately 400 children diagnosed with gastric cancer each year here in the United States. When diagnosed at a young age, pediatric patients progress very quickly resulting in the partial or total removal of the stomach. Because we live in a country that is the “melting pot” of the world, it is important that people become aware of cultural risk factors which may increase the possibility of developing gastric cancer. Just like western diets can be associated with colon cancer, there can be an increase in the risk of developing gastric cancer from salty and spicy foods found in many asian diets. Furthermore, the “family style” practice of sharing foods can oftentimes increase the spread of H Pylori which has also been linked to be a cause of gastric cancer. Through the development of the internet and social media platforms, advocacy organizations like Hope for Stomach Cancer have made a large impact on awareness, support, prevention, and legislation.

Recently, along with a few representatives from Hope for Stomach Cancer, I received a scholarship and went to the White House to meet with President Biden’s Moonshot Cancer cabinet. Their main initiative was to set new national goals to cut the number of cancer deaths by at least 50% over the next 25 years. As the only high school student, I was able to give the perspective of a young person; as well as, be the VOICE for all the children with cancer or a loved one with the disease. During our meeting with Dr Catherine Young, assistant director for Cancer Moonshot Engagement and Policy, we asked for increased research funding and better legislation for gastric cancer.

The day following my meeting at the White House, I was given the opportunity to participate in OVAC’S (One Voice Against Cancer) Grassroots Lobby Day in Washington DC as a representative for Hope for Stomach Cancer. OVAC is a coalition of 50 health organizations. Its mission is to advocate for greater federal investments in cancer research. It has grown to become the leading cancer coalition on Capitol Hill

representing millions of cancer researchers, physicians, nurses, patients, survivors, and their families.

The purpose of OVAC's Grassroots Lobby Day was to ASK Congress for increased funding for the NIH (National Institute of Health), NCI (National Cancer Institute), CDC (Centers for Disease Control), and ARPA-H (Advanced Research Projects Agency) for the 2024 national budget appropriation deadline. The meeting consisted of 85 representatives throughout the United States with the common purpose of meeting with targeted members of Congress and their staff. There were a total of 8 representatives from California. I was fortunate to be one of 3 people to meet with the offices of Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, Senator Diane Feinstein, Senator Alex Padilla, and Congresswoman Judy Chu. The ASK in each meeting was for these members of Congress to support cancer research and prevention funding in the fiscal year 2024 by providing:

- 1) \$51 billion for the NIH
- 2) \$9.988 billion NCI cancer research
- 3) \$472.4 million for CDC cancer prevention programs
- 4) \$1.5 billion for ARPA-H high risk high reward research projects

At the conclusion of all the meetings and the entire trip, I was so inspired by the strength of each volunteer as I looked back on this eventful week. Each advocate had a unique and compelling story with their walk and experience with cancer. The strength, love, and perseverance of every person at the meeting was one to be recognized and admired. It was wonderful to see how so many people from all different backgrounds could come together and have one voice for one common cause. I left Washington DC having the gratitude of taking away from this experience more than I had given. We often forget the real important things in life due to our day to day busy schedules and commitments. But after meeting many cancer survivors and even a few with little time remaining, it put things back into perspective and reminded me of the real treasures life has to offer: health, family, friendships, and wonderful memories.

This year, there were 192,770 (1.9 million in US) new diagnoses and 59,830 (609,820 in US) deaths due to cancer in California. Currently, the CDC is only able to fund 1 out of every 7 cancer research projects. Even though much progress has been made in cancer research, much more needs to be done to ensure cancer treatments for tomorrow and a cure.

This was my first trip to Washington DC. What became clear to me while visiting all the monuments on this trip was that just as the United States is the leader of the free world,

cancer prevention and a cure cannot be accomplished without Congress' leadership and help by increasing funding for further research and prevention.

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