

## **Southeastern Health**

### **Dr. Thomas Walden's Presentation**

Good afternoon. I am Dr. Thomas Walden, Radiation Oncologist at the Gibson Cancer Center of Southeastern Health.

I am in support of the petition Southeastern Health will be filing on behalf of Robeson County residents to expand their access to PET services and would like to address some of the needs that prompted the decision to file. As chair of Southeastern's Cancer Committee and as an established provider in the Robeson community, I am involved on a daily basis with patients in need of these services and can attest to the capabilities and needs associated with this program.

As you may recall, I appeared before this Council last year to address our need for a second linear accelerator. I want to echo what Steve said in appreciation for your approval of our petition last year. We know it will help us provide better care for our patients, and we believe the petition we are submitting today is another tool that will help us improve the health of our community.

When we were here last year, we told you a bit about the story of our community, its health disparities and the resilience we've seen following several catastrophic events. At the time we did not know that mere weeks after our being here, we would again be faced with major flooding, loss of homes and loss of life from the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. We recognize that a fixed PET scanner would not prevent these incidents from occurring, but given the size of our county, the number of cancer and cardiac patients we treat locally each year, and the socioeconomic disparities that are unique to our community, we believe that full-time access to a PET scanner is much needed.

As discussed previously by my colleague Steve, despite a significant and growing number of cancer patients diagnosed at the Gibson Cancer Center, not enough of them are having the PET scan they need to assist with their diagnosis and treatment planning. The limited time the mobile unit is on site is simply insufficient for our patient population. As a radiation oncologist, I try to make sure all my patients with a PET-appropriate tumor get a PET scan, even if it means leaving the county. But as Steve mentioned, many of our patients are non-compliant, even with technology we can provide locally, so asking them to take a day off work and travel for their procedure is often impossible. I also know from

my cardiology colleagues that the use of PET imaging in diagnosing and determining the most effective treatment for cardiac patients has increased significantly, but we cannot provide a single cardiology patient with this option due to the limited schedule of the mobile unit.

From a statistical perspective, our petition will demonstrate that despite being able to provide comprehensive oncology treatments locally, more than one-half of Robeson County residents having a PET scan must leave the county for care. We have also found that the use rate for PET patients in Robeson County is significantly lower than the state as a whole, indicating barriers to access exist for this service. Given the higher death rates from cancer and heart disease in our community, our patients need access to this technology to help us address this disparity.

It is also important to understand that, from a cultural perspective, our community is often reluctant to seek treatment under any circumstance; that cultural tendency is exacerbated when they have to travel outside of Robeson County for that care. Our patients have a strong sense of community and cultural identity that manifests in a trust factor unique to Robeson County; our patients are more likely to stay within their home town or with their primary provider than migrate to outside

facilities for treatment. Further, as mentioned by my colleague, our patients are burdened with socioeconomic challenges such as insufficient funds or inadequate means of transportation. When taken together, these circumstances compound the barriers our patients face in trying to receive and access quality healthcare services. To continue to meet the growing demands of our community and to ensure continual and safe care to our patients, we need a fixed PET scanner in Robeson County.

I strongly support these efforts to do just that.

Thank you.