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Initiative addresses health care for women in Gadsden and Wakulla counties

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Florida State University and Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare are working together to increase breast cancer screening for women in rural areas, starting with Gadsden and Wakulla counties.

The project's goal is to provide women who might not have access to mammograms with transportation to TMH facilities, along with information about various community resources that can help them.

Mia Lustria, a professor in FSU's College of Communication & Information whose primary focus is consumer health, initiated the project. She is collaborating with Christy Harrison, the administrator for the cancer center at TMH. Robert Glueckauf, a professor at FSU's medical school, is also involved.

The project operates under the acronym STEER, for System for Tracking, Empowering, Equipping and Reminding.

"It's a research project above everything else," Lustria said. "If you're enrolled in the program, we would be able to collect data about you so we can identify you're perceived barriers to care.

"By identifying what the barriers to care are, we can match them up with the services that help them overcome those barriers."

STEER is designed for women who are 40 and older and have not had a mammogram in the past two years. According to the National Cancer Institute, nearly 1 million women in Florida over age 40 have never had a mammogram.

Compared to urban women, rural women experience longer delays in recognizing symptoms and in seeking medical help, Lustria said.

Harrison, at TMH's Sharon Ewing Walker Breast Health Center, said 25 women have enrolled in STEER; she and Lustria want to have at least 50 for the first pilot group. Lustria chose Gadsden and Wakulla counties, Harrison said, because TMH has outreach clinics in both counties.

"We've been supportive because we have the connections to the patients and the resources to perform the screenings," Harrison said. "A woman needs a prescription to get a mammogram. We have the professionals to advise women on when they need to be screened."

Information is a key component to STEER, Lustria said. In addition to a reminder system for scheduling physician visits, the program is designed to provide women with options for child care, financial resources and transportation.