

# Vernice Davis Anthony Eleanor Josaitis Unsung Hero Award

She pushes for accountability in health care

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Vernice Davis Anthony leads the Greater Detroit Area Health Council. / KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

Her own breast cancer diagnosis was a reawakening to the vulnerability and confusion people feel as hospital patients.

It made Vernice Davis Anthony, CEO and president of the Greater Detroit Area Health

Council, more adamant about what she calls the next frontier in health care: finding ways to better inform and work with patients to help them get better care.

Allowing patients to have immediate access to their records is one way, said Anthony, a registered nurse, former director of the state health department and a senior vice president for the St. John Providence Health System.

She also has been encouraging providers to do more to address patient issues for vulnerable people who aren't computer savvy, including talking with patients' families. She favors legislative changes to empower more health care workers to take on the responsibilities of doctors, in an era of looming physician shortages. And she wants more accountability, so consumers can compare doctors and hospitals with statistics that rate them on quality measures.

"We're beginning to look at ways for how health providers can be held more accountable for the kind of care they provide and their patient outcomes," she said.

## **Standing up for consumers**

Her advocacy and leadership in metro Detroit and Michigan health care programs for nearly 30 years are among the reasons she was selected to receive a 2010 Eleanor Josaitis Unsung Hero Award.

She was raised in the Philadelphia suburbs by a mother who cleaned homes to make a living after her husband, a barber, died at age 38 of a heart attack. Anthony was 11, the third of five children.

She earned a degree in 1970 from Wayne State University, and a master's degree in public health in 1976 from the University of Michigan. One of her first jobs as a public health nurse took her to southwest Detroit, where she visited mothers with newborns and pushed for immunizations and other prevention measures.

As head of the state health department, she stood up to heavy industry opposition when she pushed for tougher standards for mammography centers.

Dr. Jerome Frankel, CEO and medical director of Oakland Southfield Physicians, one of the people who nominated Anthony for the award, said Anthony's genius is to create teams "that bring the entire community together."

He and other Detroit health care leaders credit Anthony with elevating the profile of the 66-year-old Greater Detroit Area Health Council -- for years more a research and planning agency -- into a strong regional coalition-builder.

That put the council in position to win national grants and recognition as a model business and community health consortium -- a status that should help it garner money from federal health reforms that insist on collaboration between health care providers.

"I like to say that health care reform is just a bill we signed in Washington," Anthony said from her office in downtown Detroit. "Nothing's going to happen unless we as a community own the problem."

## **Mobilizing groups in the medical industry**

One of the Greater Detroit Area Health Council's newer projects is a Web site to help consumers see how doctors and hospitals measure on quality standards. The site,

[www.mycarecompare.org](http://www.mycarecompare.org), will expand in the months ahead to include more information to compare doctors, Anthony said.

To make the site a success, the council needs to convince health care providers of the value of publishing data that show they are working to improve care and make costs affordable. Anthony likely will get the support the way she always has, prodding behind the scenes, said Chris Allen, CEO and president of the Detroit Wayne County Health Authority, a health advocacy and referral agency for uninsured and under-insured people.

"Her strength is mobilizing groups around an issue," Allen said. "She has established so many relationships over the years, and she leverages that for the programs and services she advocates."

Now 65, with a new Medicare card in her wallet, Anthony, a mother of three with three grandchildren, sees herself in a time of transition. She hints at being open to new projects.

"My greatest drive at this point is consumer empowerment," she said. "We have to go back ... to focus on people and figure out how to meet them on their terms so they can do better for themselves."

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