



## Leaders' Update

A message from Vanessa B. Sheppard, associate director for disparities research

Dear colleagues,

I am thrilled and honored to join Massey Cancer Center and to serve as its first associate director for disparities research.

My role will be to lead the cancer center's efforts to advance high-priority [disparities and minority health research](#) across all of Massey's research programs. My intention is to develop and facilitate a disparities work group and to collaborate with other cancer center leaders to foster transdisciplinary science focused on the biological, clinical and social determinants of cancer disparities. I invite you to join the group.

There is a need to better understand the complex interplay of factors that impact disparities. The strong university support makes Massey the right entity to tackle this challenge. Massey is uniquely positioned to become a national leader and hub for cancer disparities research. As a safety-net provider, we have the privilege of serving a diverse population that consists of a large percentage of racial and ethnic minorities, medically underserved and economically vulnerable individuals. Subsequently, we can develop and test innovation solutions within our own catchment area. Massey has a long history and strong foundation in cancer disparities research, particularly in the Cancer Prevention and Control program. For example, CPC members have conducted studies examining how social factors, financing systems, organizational structures/processes, health technologies and provider/patient behaviors affect cancer outcomes among racial/ethnic minorities.

In leveraging the scientific expertise, engagement of a diverse population and emerging technological advances (e.g., precision medicine), we can contribute to knowledge about complex cancers such as triple negative breast cancer, understand how best to engage racial/ethnic minorities and their physicians in clinical trials and ensure that all populations benefit from current knowledge of risk reduction strategies and available treatments through innovative behavioral interventions.

Along with the outstanding science underway, we have extensive community education and outreach initiatives across the state, such as the [Cancer Research and Resource Centers of Southern Virginia](#) in Lawrenceville and Danville, the [Healthy Living and](#)

[Learning Center](#) in Petersburg and the [Minority-Underserved NCORP statewide clinical trials network](#). My goal is to engage stakeholders from Massey's community education and outreach programs to advise the research work group so that these activities inform one another.

The passion of investigators, clinicians and staff at Massey has shone through all of my interactions to date. I look forward to working with you to alleviate cancer disparities. I will soon send you a survey to find out more about the on-going disparities-related research and what you identify as the potential opportunities for novel transdisciplinary science. I hope you will take the time to complete the survey and to share your feedback. I look forward to learning more about your research over the next few months. Please feel free to e-mail me.

Wishing you and yours happy holidays.

Sincerely,

Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.  
Associate director for disparities research and co-leader of Cancer Prevention and Control