

March 2, 2026

Dear American Head and Neck Society Application Reviewers,

Please accept our proposal for the 2026 AHNS Cancer Prevention Community Service Award. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Title:** Youth-Led Prevention: A Community Partnership Model for H&N Cancer Awareness

**Project Leadership:** Cindy Wu, BS; Kush Kataria, BA; Marissa Albanese, BS; Celina Cho, BS; Kirsten L. Ek, MD; John E. Hanks, MD; Kevin J. Kovatch, MD, FACS

**Community Partners:** Violette Haldane, Executive Director, Advocacy To Legacy; Angela Harris, Chair, Phillips Health Ministry of Phillips Metropolitan CME Church

### **Introduction and Aims:**

Head and neck cancers remain a significant cause of death and disability that disproportionately affects low-income communities and communities of color – driven in large part by tobacco exposure, which is three times higher among the lowest-income Americans than the highest.<sup>1</sup> Early detection and care are one of the most impactful factors in improving prognosis, yet awareness remains critically limited in these high-risk, low-resource communities.<sup>2</sup>

North Hartford, Connecticut, exemplifies these challenges. The North Hartford Promise Zone (NHPZ) is a federally-designated high-poverty area with a predominantly Black and Hispanic/Latino population and over 60% of residents living in low-income households.<sup>3</sup> Tobacco products are pervasive in this neighborhood, with convenience stores selling cigarettes and menthol products far outnumbering grocery stores. To advance health-promoting messaging, we will partner with North Hartford's strong network of community organizations, including Advocacy To Legacy (A2L), which empowers youth ambassadors to lead neighborhood change, and Phillips Health Ministry, which provides health education, screenings, and resources to the community.

This proposal builds on the A2L's established youth leadership infrastructure to train their cohorts of youth ambassadors on H&N cancer awareness. Educational materials will be developed with the youth and incorporated into their current campaigns addressing the harms of second and third-hand smoke. The A2L ambassadors were the catalyst behind advancing CT's Tobacco 21 legislation, raising the legal tobacco purchasing age from 18 to 21, first in the city of Hartford and then in the state, showcasing their capacity to lead meaningful public health change. This approach creates a sustainable, community-driven impact as young people will carry their knowledge into their families, schools, and community events.

### **Target Population:**

The primary target population is A2L's cohort of youth ambassadors (approximately 6-8 high school students), who will serve as trained peer educators. Through their ongoing community engagement – tabling events, legislative forums, and everyday family conversations – these youth will reach a broader audience of Hartford residents in the neighborhoods most affected by tobacco marketing and limited access to health education and prevention knowledge.

### **Project Design/Methods:**

We will partner with A2L to integrate H&N cancer awareness into their existing youth ambassador program. The project will include three components:

1. **Youth Training Sessions:** Our team will develop and lead training sessions for the youth cohort on H&N cancer risk factors, warning signs, and the importance of early detection – connecting directly to the tobacco prevention work they already do. Training will take place during the ambassadors' regular Tuesday/Thursday schedule during the school year, with faculty or a UConn ENT resident present to supervise and answer clinical questions.
2. **Co-Development of Educational Materials:** Together with the youth, we will create bilingual (English/Spanish) pamphlets for H&N cancer awareness, tailored for community distribution. A page on the A2L site will also be made to serve as a resource for more information, which will be provided on all materials. Co-developing

materials will foster a strong sense of ownership among youth ambassadors, increasing their familiarity with the content and empowering them to serve as confident messengers for their community.

- Community Distribution and Outreach: Youth ambassadors will distribute materials at their existing community events, which include local forums and tabling. The integration into ongoing programming ensures impact extends beyond the award period.

**Timeline:**

Timing	March 2026	April 2026	May-June 2026
Phase of Project	Project initiation and grant funding activation.	Project implementation and youth training. Training will be held at the A2L in Hartford, CT.	Project completion and community dissemination.

The proposed timeline allows our project to align with ongoing community outreach efforts while establishing a foundation for future H&N cancer screening initiatives. Our initial efforts will focus on partnering with a youth empowerment organization to provide training on H&N cancer prevention and to collaboratively develop culturally responsive educational materials. During the summer and school year, youth ambassadors will disseminate these materials through existing community activities.

**Budget and Cost:**

This project does not receive funding from any other source. The \$1,000 award will be allocated as follows: approximately \$700–800 for youth ambassador stipends (6–8 youth compensated at \$15/hour for ~6–7 hours each, supporting training sessions and collaborative material development), approximately \$100–150 for printing bilingual educational pamphlets and fact sheets for community distribution, and approximately \$50–100 for development of a dedicated resource page on the A2L website. No indirect costs or salary support for faculty or medical students are included, as all supervision and project coordination time will be contributed in-kind.

**Expected Outcomes and Community Impact:**

Completion of this project will lead to an increase in community H&N cancer knowledge, awareness of warning signs, and understanding of risk factors among participating youth ambassadors. Through bilingual materials and outreach at community events, youth ambassadors will disseminate culturally relevant information to families and residents in North Hartford, who have limited access to specialty cancer education. Program reach can be evaluated based on event participation and distribution metrics.

By first building H&N cancer awareness and community trust through youth-led education, we seek to lay the groundwork for direct screening events at established North Hartford community venues as a future direction. The success of this initiative will also provide valuable proof of concept to support the expanded scope of intervention, including HPV-mediated oropharyngeal SCC community education and awareness.

Over the long term, this project is expected to strengthen community capacity for cancer prevention by integrating H&N cancer awareness within an existing, trusted youth-led infrastructure. By empowering young people as credible messengers, the project fosters sustainable knowledge transfer across households and neighborhoods. Increased awareness of symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of early evaluation may promote earlier presentation for care and improved linkage to primary or specialty services. Importantly, the partnership between Advocacy To Legacy, Phillips Health Ministry, and UConn Health establishes a foundation for future screening initiatives and referral pathways, advancing health equity in a high-burden community.

**References**

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- Zeitouni JF, Millsap J, May H, Jang W, Dundar Y. Head and neck cancer symptoms and risk factors awareness and effectiveness of educational intervention for underserved populations. *OTO Open.* 2025 Mar 7;9(1):e70089. doi: 10.1002/oto2.70089. PMID: 40061294; PMCID: PMC11886989.
- Community Action Task Force, UConn Health Equity Lab for the People, DataHaven. North Hartford health report: Data to action. Hartford (CT): DataHaven; 2025 Jun. Available from: [https://ctdatahaven.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/DH\\_NorthHartfordHealthRpt\\_FIN\\_WEB.pdf](https://ctdatahaven.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/DH_NorthHartfordHealthRpt_FIN_WEB.pdf)