

Mayra Galindo Leal - CEO, Mexican Association for the Fight Against Cancer (AMLCC)



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As the country's most important patient organization for cancer, the Mexican Association for the Fight Against Cancer (AMLCC) focuses on education, prevention and patient support, as well as on influencing public affairs. CEO and long-term patient advocate Mayra Galindo walks us through some of the AMLCC's milestones, including the creation of a cancer network to unite the efforts of different organizations, and assuring the inclusion of more types of cancer within the public healthcare system. In addition, she discusses the challenges of transitioning from the Seguro Popular to the INSABI system and insuring that treatments continue to reach remote areas.

Can you begin by telling us how you began advocating for patients?

From a young age, I was very involved in church activities and helping people. At 18, I got sick with hypoglycaemia, and after discovering my illness at the National Institute of Nutrition (INN), my mom began volunteering at the institute.

At that time, volunteering was not typical at the INN. My mom, along with two other women, decided to start a volunteer group at the INN. I, already married with two daughters, also joined as

a volunteer. I would ask for permission at work to leave on Wednesdays and help with volunteering.

Volunteering at the INN was challenging; the offices were not in the best condition, and the hospitals were in poor shape. I spent 17 years volunteering, helping to improve conditions and organizing activities for patients. Eventually, I was appointed treasurer, secretary, and later president of the group. We helped patients by providing clothes, hygiene items, and, in some cases, even food supplies thanks to donations. I also managed to find someone to rent us oxygen concentrators at a good price. We set up a small store where we sold donated items to raise funds.

My work in volunteering was well-known, and because of that, I received an offer to work at the Mexican Association for the Fight Against Cancer (AMLCC). At first, it was challenging because I was not used to having a formal job, but I learned a lot and managed to organize some significant events, including the association's 25th-anniversary celebration.

Upon joining, I quickly realized the lack of resources and educational materials about cancer. So, I took on a more active role, starting by improving communication and collaboration with other cancer organizations and optimizing resource management.

I have had the great fortune of participating in international events, such as the American Cancer Society conference, which increased the association's visibility in both the United States and Latin America. Attending these events led me to implement programmes in Mexico and learn about the importance of advocacy in public policies related to cancer.

What would you say are the main achievements of the AMLCC?

There have been several. One of them is that we established a cancer network in Mexico City to unite efforts among different organizations and improve our capacity to help.

Over the years, we have secured significant donations, like those from Avon (today Natura), which allowed us to buy medical equipment and support more patients.

What we are most proud of is that we managed to include more types of cancer within the Seguro Popular healthcare system, increasing its support to patients who needed treatment but could not afford it. When Seguro Popular started covering these types of cancer, our budget got some relief, and we could focus our efforts on other types of cancer that were not yet covered. However, with the arrival of the Institute of Health for Well-being (INSABI) system, many established programmes were affected, but we continue to fight to maintain the necessary support for cancer patients.

In short, I would say that our greatest achievement is that we have made significant advances in cancer care and prevention in Mexico.

How do you reach the most vulnerable communities?

At the beginning of the association, we tried to establish branches in various states like Toluca, Colima, and Michoacán, but faced limitations in resources and communication that hindered effective expansion. Inspired by a conference I attended in Atlanta, I decided to form a network in Mexico City to unite all cancer organizations, which has now evolved and meets virtually every second Tuesday of the month.

This network, which has existed for 24 years, has three main objectives: ensuring no one goes without help, offering monthly training to its members, and strengthening our influence on health policy, especially in areas like tobacco control.

With the advancement of technologies like Zoom, we proposed expanding the network nationwide, creating 'Together Against Cancer Network,' which now includes almost one organization per state. We are working to establish local networks that help improve access and quality of health services at the state level.

What has been the biggest challenge you have encountered?

The biggest challenge has been adapting to changes in health policy and ensuring treatments remain accessible, especially in more remote areas. We have faced significant challenges due to changes in health policy, such as the transition from the Seguro Popular to the INSABI, which has affected the continuity and effectiveness of cancer treatment programmes.

Despite these obstacles, we continue to strive to ensure that treatments are available beyond centralized areas, helping patients travel to accredited hospitals when necessary.

Finally, we advocate for the creation of more robust and well-funded national cancer registries and programmes, inspired by international healthcare models, like those I have observed in Switzerland, which offer universal and efficient access to health services.

What do you see as the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like yours in healthcare and in society more broadly?

I have always believed in the need for civil society organizations because they fulfill tasks that governments fail to achieve. It is essential that we remain united as a civil society to achieve a more equitable, equal, and just healthcare system in Mexico. We are committed to be the patients' voice.

Unity is fundamental to ensuring effective actions are taken. After the elimination of official standards, we have fought intensely, though without the desired response. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen our presence and become the effective voice of society. Even doctors, who often lack a platform to be heard, can trust us to amplify their concerns. Together, we can project a stronger and clearer message for a healthier country.

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