CEO of the American Cancer Society Announces Transition Plans

Transformative leader will enter the next phase of her strategy to accelerate progress against cancer

PHILADELPHIA, September 13, 2024 - Following her transformative tenure at the American Cancer Society (ACS) and its advocacy affiliate the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), CEO Karen E. Knudsen, MBA PhD, announced her desire to transition from both organizations toward the next phase of her strategy to accelerate progress against cancer. The ACS Board of Directors is expected to appoint an interim CEO before the end of the year and to start a national search for a new CEO. Knudsen has agreed to stay on and serve as an Executive Strategic Advisor, to support that transition, through early 2025.

An internationally recognized oncology expert and healthcare leader, Knudsen took the helm of ACS and ACS CAN in 2021 with the charge to bring the venerated organization from a former federated model into strong performance as a single enterprise. In partnership with the Board of Directors, Knudsen modernized the mission, vision, and strategy of the organization to focus on improving the lives of cancer patients and their families.

Under her leadership, Knudsen and her executive team steered the organization into a period of exceptional growth and innovation. Annual revenue increased by more than 30% since 2020, with the organization concurrently reaching new heights for functional allocation of revenue spent on the mission to improve lives. Accordingly, ACS was awarded the highest possible rating from Charity Navigator for the first time in its history.

“The American Cancer Society was in search of a visionary leader, and that is exactly what we found in Dr. Knudsen. She and her team have transformed ACS into an even more impactful, successful charitable organization,” said Brian Marlow, Chair of the ACS Board of Directors. “I speak on behalf of the entire Board in thanking her for the steadfast dedication to ACS and the people we exist to serve in the cancer community.”

“Dr. Knudsen has been a trailblazer in so many ways. She was the first CEO of ACS to come from the oncology community, and she brought with her exceptional know-how based not only on her business acumen, but on her understanding of the cancer challenge, and what patients need,” said Dr. Ned Sharpless, a member of the ACS Board of Directors.

Knudsen’s strategy for improving lives, which was wholly endorsed by the Board of Directors, stands on a commitment to health equity, and improving lives through innovation and increased access to care. Notable achievements under her tenure to date include establishment of the organization’s first ACS Chief Diversity Officer, significant expansion of ACS funded cancer research (with over $465 million currently committed), creation of the ACS Patient Support Pillar to solve for the logistical needs of cancer patients, and policy accomplishments at both the federal and state level that increased access to quality cancer prevention and care. Notable policy wins include federal coverage for patient navigators, and state level wins to ensure access to biomarker testing.

In addition to these achievements, a hallmark of Knudsen’s tenure at ACS was significant growth in strategic partnerships and innovative business models. As part of her vision, ACS transformed and grew BrightEdge, the impact investment arm of ACS, toward the goal of enhancing the near-term patient benefit of cancer research breakthroughs. Moreover, two mission aligned businesses were launched to support the ACS mission—a joint venture with Color Health, aimed at increasing uptake of cancer screening, and ACS LION, a training and certification program for cancer patient navigators. Key partnerships were also created, including major endeavors with the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

Knudsen added, “These are precisely the types of strategic partnerships and innovation accelerators that I plan to enhance beyond the walls of ACS.”

“I am so proud of what we have achieved together as an organization. Our strategy to improve lives is working, and ACS is now poised to further increase its impact in solving for the cancer problem,” said Knudsen. “I have achieved what I came to do. The path forward is clear, and I have every confidence that ACS and ACS CAN will

continue to thrive. At present I am working with the Board to develop a smooth transition plan that will give me a greater opportunity beyond that of a 501c3 to leverage innovation, strategic partnerships, and policy toward addressing the problem of cancer."

"We are working with Dr. Knudsen on the precise timing of a transition," said Marlow. "We are stronger because of her strategic vision and look forward to a bright future for both ACS and ACS CAN."

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About American Cancer Society
The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, X, and Instagram.

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