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Prostate cancer survivors and their spouses answer questions at Tuesday's Charter for Change signing.

From left: Maureen Kiefert, James Kiefert, Douglas Jardine, Sandy Jardine

A call to action: Blue ribbon network leads fight against prostate cancer

by **MARY SQUILLACE**
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Now there's the blue ribbon to add to the pink one associated with breast cancer.

A blue ribbon pinned to a lapel marks the fight stepped up this week against prostate cancer. An international initiative launched in Chicago builds on the success of pink ribbon campaigns to escalate awareness about breast cancer screening and treatment.

"Before lunch 26 more men across America will most likely be diagnosed with prostate cancer," said Chicagoan Thomas Kirk, president and CEO of the Us TOO International Prostate Cancer Education and Support Network.

And those 26 men are among nearly 679,000 diagnosed with the disease worldwide every year.

"We often see stories about breast cancer and what is often not realized is that prostate diagnoses [are] at a higher rate than breast cancer," he said as he opened the launch of Learning, Living and Loving: A Call to Action in Prostate Cancer.

Representatives from 13 organizations from across the U.S. and Europe met in Chicago to sign a charter calling for improvement in prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment. Disseminating timely and accurate information about prostate cancer is an underlying theme of this initiative that was kicked off Tuesday at US Cellular Field.

The charter's purpose is to draw attention to all aspects of the cancer, including the side effects of treatment and needs to support the emotional health of patients and their families.

"The disease and its treatment can have a significant impact on lifestyle and on emotional well-being, changes in relationships and, in particular, on sexual intimacy," Kirk said. Prostate cancer can cause varying degrees of impotence or incontinence.

As part of the program, two couples shared their experiences with prostate cancer.

"We needed much earlier attention to sexual and relational issues," said Sandy Jardine, from Scottsdale, Ariz. "As a couple we needed to know much earlier and before the surgery about the mere certainty of the likelihood of permanent sexual consequences and dysfunction."

Douglas and Sandy Jardine, who are both relationship counselors in Scottsdale, discussed what they learned from their experience with sexual side effects that resulted from Douglas' surgery.

According to the Jardines, clear and accurate information about potential side effects are key when it comes to maintaining a healthy relationship.

James Kiefert, a cancer survivor, and his wife, Maureen, emphasized the importance of providing support for a patient's family.

"My God, I'm going to be a widow," said Maureen Kiefert, recalling how she felt after hearing her husband's diagnosis.

Maureen said she was actively involved in her husband's treatment, educating herself on the disease and how to address it from an emotional and spiritual standpoint as well as a physical one.

"We began on a journey together as a couple," Kiefert said. "I would not be standing here today had it not been for the support of my wife throughout this whole process."

The charter's core goal of educating the public and patients, could also have important effects when it comes to promoting policy that advances prostate cancer prevention efforts, according to Skip Lockwood, CEO of ZERO, a prostate cancer prevention organization in Washington, D.C.

Bringing prostate cancer to the public's attention is a crucial step toward preventing deaths and providing men adequate treatment, said Lockwood.

"The problem that we have is we need the general public to jump behind this issue and we need men to stand-up" and follow the activism of women fighting for better breast cancer diagnosis and treatment for everyone. "Until we build up a public momentum it will be easy for Congress to justify not being engaged."

Kirk believes that the movement is gaining momentum and is hopeful for its future.

"I've seen a change in the last four-and-a-half years since I've been involved," Kirk said. "When I started there, people didn't know what it was or how to pronounce it. Now people are recognizing it, they're talking more openly about it, and they're telling other people to get tested, get checked."