

## Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research: Critical Support



### Gay R. Thomas

Director of Stakeholder Engagement  
Wisconsin Network for Research Support  
School of Nursing

*“Gay is the backbone of this unique and innovative resource for researchers.”*

— Barbara Bowers

Medical researchers often struggle to recruit people for studies, especially from underserved populations, a troubling scenario that perpetuates health disparities. In 2010, Gay Thomas co-founded Wisconsin Network for Research Support to address this persistent challenge.

Instead of bringing community members to researchers, Thomas and her colleagues take researchers into the community through a range of advisory groups and other partnership strategies. Rather than presenting researchers as the “experts,” they help community members use their own lived experiences to advise researchers on effective communication with the patients they hope to reach.

Thomas led the creation of two unique groups that together are called the

Community Advisors on Research Design and Strategies and has facilitated over 200 meetings between research teams from multiple disciplines and these groups. Thomas and her team have leveraged “lessons learned” from the Community Advisors to develop more than 20 additional patient/community advisory groups, generating powerful advice to advance patient-centered research.

Started with a single grant from the National Institutes of Health, the network today exists as a successful fee-for-service resource — an amazing testament to Thomas’ passion.

“Gay is the backbone of this unique and innovative resource for researchers,” says Professor Barbara Bowers, Associate Dean for Research at the School of Nursing.