



California Hospice Foundation



CHOICES

Empowering People

Spring 2011

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Volunteering: A Privilege and a Gift

“Being a hospice volunteer is a privilege.”

Those are the words of Gretchen Kingsbury, a volunteer at the Hospice of Amador & Calaveras, yet they reflect the sentiments of many hospice volunteers. Volunteers feel privileged to be allowed into a very personal, some say sacred, space.

Valerie Chambers, a Madrone Hospice volunteer for four years, became so intrigued with hospice care that she researched its history. Throughout the centuries, she learned, communities have come together to support the dying. “That’s the hospice promise, patients will not die alone.” Volunteers help hospices keep that promise.

When a patient in hospice care requests a volunteer, hospice staff make a match based on mutual interests and hobbies, driving distance, preference for households with or without pets, and preference for non-smoking or smoking households. The volunteer agrees to spend a few hours a week visiting with the patient, and sometimes helping out with errands too.

One of the highlights of volunteering is listening to patients’ stories. Volunteers are transported back in time to imagine life from the perspective, for example, of a young wife and mother during World War II. When her husband went off to war, she moved her household so she could work in a factory, like Rosie the Riveter. When the war ended, she had to give up the job she had come to love. “It was a man’s world. I moved on.” Patients sometimes ask volunteers to record their stories so their families can hear

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If you or anyone you know has a need for Hospice Information and Referral services please call the California Hospice Foundation’s toll free number: 888-252-1010

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them too, often for the first time.

Volunteers go into this work knowing that eventually their patient will die. Training gives them the preparation they need to handle it emotionally. They've learned about signs and symptoms of approaching death, grief, bereavement support and how different cultures and religions experience death.

Death means an end to their patients' suffering. Judy Boggess, who volunteers at Amador & Calaveras, says, "I focus on the good. I remember how I felt when my mother died in hospice." It helps that patients are often not afraid of death, and many look forward to seeing their loved ones who have already passed.

Gretchen also focuses on the positive. "Perhaps that's the greatest gift of hospice, having the opportunity to say good-bye to each other."

Valerie recommends that volunteers know how to reset themselves. "Some like to walk in the woods. I like to knit. It's important to know what we need therapeutically." Monthly volunteer meetings are part of that therapeutic self-care. Volunteers share their challenges and questions, find support and enjoy each other's company.

The rewards are well worth it. Doing this type of work has given these volunteers a deeper perspective about life. Valerie now sees death as another phase of life and likens their work "to ushering in a birth, instead, we're ushering them on to the next life."

They see their volunteering as a gift. Judy says her experience has been reassuring to her children. They know now that hospice will be there for them too one day. "It's very rewarding. I hope I can do this for a long long time."

"From the moment of birth we are in the process of dying," Gretchen reminds us. "Because we can't know our own timetable, we live each day as fully as possible. I think hospice has helped me put this into perspective and action."

Valerie's personal credo – "we all matter" – was borne out of her volunteering experience. Another lesson came four years ago from her first patient who told her, "Life is too short, retire as soon as you can." At the end of the month, she and her husband are retiring. "I just turned 60 and I've never forgotten that advice." ♡



*Both articles in this month's issue of **CHOICES** were written by Deirdre Reid. Deirdre is a writer, blogger and association consultant at **Reid All About It** in North Carolina.*

Hospice Volunteers Make a Huge Difference

The face of the hospice volunteer is changing. Hospices once relied on retired spouses of former patients, but volunteer coordinators are now seeing a wider range of people expressing interest. They attribute this trend to a few factors:

- Economic conditions have led to more unemployed or under-employed people looking for meaningful volunteer work.
- Volunteering has become a habit for many who had community service requirements in high school.
- Hospices are getting better at using traditional and social media, speakers bureaus, hospice shops, fund-raising events and word of mouth marketing to increase their visibility in the community.

Although hospices are required by Medicare to have volunteers provide at least 5% of total patient care hours, Audrey Flowers, executive director at Madrone Hospice in Yreka, says, “We absolutely rely on our volunteers. With 35 staff and 130 volunteers, so many jobs are done by them.”

The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) estimates that 468,000 hospice volunteers provided 22 million hours of service in 2009 – that’s 47 hours each! Most volunteers (57.6%) spend time with patients and families, 21.5% provide office or other internal support to the hospice and 20.9% help with fundraising efforts or serve on boards.

Volunteers also contribute creative skills, making photo collages or knitting afghans. At Elizabeth Hospice in San Diego County, volunteers sew cuddle bears from clothing donated by families. Their choir performs at skilled nursing facilities. Volunteers at Madrone Hospice recycle donations into handcrafted home décor and gift items for their Heartisan Boutique.

Volunteers play a critical role in patient care. Their weekly visits not only provide companionship to patients but also respite to caregivers who might not otherwise have time to run errands, see friends or simply be alone to recharge. Volunteers receive at least 20 hours of patient care training, either in a class at set times throughout the year or online training on-demand.


Specialized training is offered for dementia care and for Last Watch – sitting with patients in their last hours of life. Elizabeth Hospice also offers training in aromatherapy, music or art therapy, reiki, pet therapy and spiritual support. At Hospice of Amador & Calaveras volunteers train as Griefbusters, helping kids work through the grieving process.

Elizabeth Hospice partnered with high schools to start a teen volunteering program. After training, teams of teens visit patients in skilled nursing facilities to “spread their joy,” according to Gisela Sannar, volunteer coordinator. “One team discovered a patient’s love of birds. They built and hung a birdhouse right outside her window, filling it when they visited.”

Volunteers often know what will bring their patients peace. One of Gisela’s volunteers learned that her patient had grown up on a farm and wanted to milk a cow once more. The hospice arranged for a cow to be brought to the patient’s location. Gisela, not able to resist a pun, reports, “It was an udderly wonderful experience.”

At Hospice of Amador & Calaveras, volunteers help patients and caretakers create private blogs to share updates and connect with faraway family and friends. Ann Methard, the hospice’s volunteer coordinator, says, “The idea was developed by the granddaughter of a patient. It’s not real popular yet but we think it has great potential.”

One of Audrey’s volunteers at Madrone Hospice wanted to try a story-keeping program she had read about. “We encouraged her to take ownership and move forward with a pilot program. We provide support and she’ll report to the board about its progress. We’re very open to new ideas from our community.”

Gisela says, “Our volunteers always say they get more out of their experience than they give. But we remind them, they make a huge difference in the patient’s and caregiver’s life because of their presence. That is a very special role.” 

ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Volunteer Month

April is National Volunteer Month. To find a hospice in your area to volunteer at, call us at 888-252-1010 or visit our website at www.cahospicefoundation.com and click on “find a hospice” to get phone numbers and website links.

Find Us On Facebook

CHF is now on Facebook! To find us, search for “California Hospice Foundation” and click “like” to receive links to advice, news and inspiration stories. We will also use this page to let you know about hospice legislative activity and volunteer opportunities.

California Hospice Foundation



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