



End-of-Life Guide: Hospice volunteers need special kind of compassion

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TRaverse CITY -- There are many kinds of journeys with different types of guides. On one's journey at the end of life a hospice volunteer is a welcome guide.

Hospice is a special kind of compassionate care for terminally ill patients and their loved ones. It addresses the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and social needs of a person in his or her last stage of life. The goal of hospice is to provide everything patients and their loved ones need most -- freedom from pain, emotional and spiritual support, and the ability to control the direction of the care.

"Hospice is so highly valued by the community because of the help and support we provide at such a difficult time in people's lives," said Meredith Goodrick, director of Munson Hospice and Palliative Care in Traverse City.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of hospice, serving in many different capacities including direct patient care, office assistance, running errands, serving on advisory boards and more, Goodrick said. "There is the opportunity for any talent," she said.

Susan Buxton has volunteered with Munson Hospice for more than three years, as has her husband. They began when they first moved to the area and wanted to get involved in the community. As Buxton describes, "We were looking for an avenue into a worthwhile project."

Since that time, her volunteering has focused on direct patient care at Munson Hospice House and in clients' homes. "At hospice we do what we can to make people comfortable. Being able to be a part of providing that is a real joy," Buxton said.

Patients and their families and significant others have three hospice programs to choose from in the Grand Traverse region - - Munson Hospice, Hospice of Michigan and Heartland Hospice Care. Between these programs there are many more similarities than differences. Dignity, choice and comfort are common themes weaving through all of their missions.

Hospice services are provided in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted-living facilities and in patient homes. Munson Hospice also operates Munson Hospice House, a unique residential facility. "Wherever we deliver services our focus is on offering compassionate care at an important time in people's final journey," said Kathy Lietart, volunteer services manager for Hospice of Michigan. Services are covered under Medicare, Medicaid and most private insurances.

No matter where hospice care is provided, there is an ongoing need for volunteers. "Volunteers serve a very important role for our patients," said Lietart, "They offer companionship to clients and provide caregiver relief."

Volunteers are given comprehensive training so they are well prepared for any role they choose. "There's such a strong support system for volunteers," Buxton said. "The support and help we get from hospice staff is wonderful, and we are never asked to do anything we are uncomfortable with."

Hospice is unique in its caring for the patient's family and significant others, as well as the patient. "Death and end of life are such a taboo that most of us are ill prepared," said Goodrick. "In hospice, we look at how everyone is adapting, and it's usually the people around the patient who have the hardest time adapting."

Tracy Lark, corporate director of communications for Hospice of Michigan agreed. "We bring support to the entire family ... and a lot of the fear and anxiety that accompanies a serious illness can be reduced."

Hospice volunteers, whether they are sitting with a patient, working in the office or playing music for a family group, describe the sense of fulfillment they find. Buxton said, "Hospice care makes end of life so much more peaceful and I'm grateful to see such peace." Lietart echoed this, "Our volunteers will tell you it's a blessing to be with patients in their journey."

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Photos



Mary Lou Harding, of Traverse City, a volunteer for Munson Hospice and Palliative Care, practices reading poetry to Sue Yemmans, a Munson Hospice nursing assistant who poses as a patient. Photo courtesy of Munson Hospice