

Reaching out

By CARY ASPINWALL World Scene Writer
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Hospices focus on finding underserved minorities

For Pearl Baker, 80, having hospice care means she can spend more time in her garden and the home her late husband and family built west of Sand Springs.

"I just want to stay out here and enjoy life," she said. "I love it." She has lots of family members to help care for her — but now she gets weekly visits from InFINITYCare of Tulsa hospice nurse Mary Ann Onley as well.

Several local hospice organizations are focusing on outreach to minorities and low-income individuals who qualify for their services but don't often use them. Over the past few decades, several studies have shown that minority populations are underserved by hospice organizations.

So local hospices say they're using outreach and education to ensure more minorities know and use the palliative care options available.

Donna Stidham, director of development for Hospice of Green Country Inc., said her organization's percentage of Hispanic patients lagged behind estimates for the Tulsa-area population of Hispanics.

"We looked at our numbers for every year and realized we were not serving as many people as we should in the Hispanic community," Stidham said.

So they hired an outreach coordinator, Lorena Arista-Whelan, to share the message about Green Country Hospice's mission in the Hispanic community.

Green Country's Courtesy Care program, the free hospice program for those who could not otherwise afford it, had no Hispanic patients until program staff began the outreach service.

Now, Whelan speaks to thousands of Hispanic families each year — at churches, health fairs, hospitals. Green Country has all of its publications printed in Spanish as well.

The outreach is working, Stidham said, because Green Country now gets lots of calls and referrals from doctors and hospitals for Hispanic patients.

The biggest challenge has been earning trust from Hispanic families who traditionally take care of their own aging parents and grandparents, Whelan said.

"They're not accustomed to putting their elderly parents in nursing homes," Whelan said, "or having someone else care for them."

Hospices also must overcome certain cultural stigmas. In some countries, hospice is thought of as a place to abandon the ill, such as an asylum, Whelan said.

Hospice in the United States is an inhome service focused on comfort and care of terminally ill patients and their families, she said.

Green Country, a nonprofit agency, provides hospice for patients of all ethnicities and incomes. But in recent years, the hospice has also started outreach to Hispanic HIV and AIDS patients as well as the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, Stidham said.

Deborah Brazeal, president of InFINITYCare of Tulsa, said her hospice organization started developing a plan for outreach based on national statistics that showed black and low-income individuals were not using hospice as much as they could.

“Some of it is rooted in a mistrust of the healthcare system, and a misunderstanding of the purpose of hospice,” she said. InFINITYCare accomplishes its outreach through churches and making sure its staff is diverse, she said. They also have an office in north Tulsa, and are involved in several community organizations in the area.

Studies have shown that in black populations, some equated turning to hospice as giving up hope – a common misconception, Brazeal said.

“People see it – mistakenly – as a point of no return,” she said. “That’s absolutely not true.”

Dying doesn’t scare or worry Pearl Baker. Her late husband knew he was going to die long before any other family member did, she said.

“It doesn’t bother me none,” she said. “You do what you can while you can, and do something for someone else. Even if you’re sick, you can be a whole lot of help to someone else.”

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For more

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www.infinitycare.com

National Hospice Foundation

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www.nationalhospicefoundation.org

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Mary Ann Onley, a nurse for InFinity Care Hospice of Tulsa, checks in on patient Pearl Baker at least once a week. Baker, 80, lives west of Sand Springs and likes that hospice care allows her to stay at home.

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