



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 afghan quilts. 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.”