

Health — VNHC offers 11th Hour program for hospice patients

STAMFORD — Hospice Services at Visiting Nurse and Hospice Care offers the Eleventh Hour program, which is based on the premise that no one should die alone. The Eleventh Hour begins when a hospice patient is "actively" dying [generally less than 12 hours to live.] VNHC initiates around-the-clock companionship for the patient.

Generally, the patient has no family or friends available to sit with them, or the family needs intermittent support during the hours they cannot be there. Often a patient is widowed, and without children; the children may be out of town or unable to leave work for extended periods of time, or the patient and their family are estranged. For those that are alone and scared, the Eleventh Hour volunteer provides a soothing presence. They may hold a patient's hand, sing or speak to them in a reassuring way, or simply just be present.

"Sometimes you just need to let a patient know that its okay to let go," said Ellen Perrott, long-time hospice volunteer and Eleventh Hour trainee. "Sometimes you need to just let them know there is nothing to fear on the other side."

VNHC, a nonprofit health care agency has been in Stamford for more than 90 years. Today, VNHC is an independent agency with an annual budget of more than \$11 million and serves all of lower Fairfield County. They have a hospice residence with 12 beds, and a thriving state-of-the-art home health care division that renders more than 70,000 visits in the community a year.

In order to volunteer with patients, VNHC offers a 30-hour, five-week training program. An additional eight hours of specialized training is required for volunteers interested in the unusual kind of service that the Eleventh Hour program demands. VNHC's volunteer coordinator Barb Sawyer manages the volunteer effort and runs the training program. The Rev. Katherine Silvan, pastoral care coordinator at VNHC taught the additional curriculum for the Eleventh Hour. To date, six volunteers have been trained to accompany those actively dying through their final stage of life. VNHC plans to train an additional 18 and 20 volunteers for the Eleventh Hour program.

The first call for the Eleventh Hour program came shortly after it's launch. Teri Anderson, a hospice team social worker, visited a patient in a local nursing home. The patient was

suffering from end stage dementia and had no surviving spouse. The patient had not had a visitor in more than three years. Volunteer coordinator Barbara Sawyer stayed at the patient's bedside, after she had arranged for a schedule of uninterrupted companionship for the patient, in two-hour shifts. She took the first shift.

Dying is a process, and with predictable stages that each volunteer studies in the training program. Sawyer could see that her patient was in the last phases of life when she arrived at his bedside at 12:30 p.m. He could not speak, but his eyes were open. Sawyer was aware that the last sense to go is generally hearing. She sang softly and sensed that he connected with the music. Sawyer maintained continuous eye contact with the patient for two-and-a-half hours. Her goal was to keep a steady chain of attention focused on the patient. The next volunteer was due to relieve her at 3 p.m. At 3 p.m. the patient died.

Sawyer said she truly felt a connection with her patient.

"It felt good to be there, and the whole experience was marvelously rewarding," she said.

Anne Rich, VNHC's executive director, describes the hospice program as, "an election of care for both patient and caregiver whose desire is to die comfortably at home ... Our first concern is the level of comfort for the patient. We are pain management experts."

VNHC also has an extensive bereavement program that involves a lot of pre-grief work — particularly with surviving family. Relationship resolution and the simple opportunity to say good bye with support and counseling can really make a big difference for family members.

The agency expects about one patient a month to need volunteers. It takes a special kind of employee and volunteer to do hospice work — people with great compassion who are comfortable around death and dying.