

Hospice pioneer to put passion to work in Africa

Philip DiSorbo leaves local group to lead new effort to improve end-of-life care

By **DAN HIGGINS**, Staff writer

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First published: Wednesday, June 28, 2006

Philip DiSorbo helped launch the hospice movement in the United States a quarter-century ago. Soon, he will leave for Africa, where he said the continent is prepared for a hospice boom of its own.

DiSorbo, 58, ended his 27-year tenure as director of the region's Community Hospice last week to become the first director of the Foundation for Hospices in Sub-Saharan Africa. The group is based in Alexandria, Va., but DiSorbo expects to spend about three months a year helping people in nations like Zimbabwe and Rwanda build hospices as he did in Schenectady.

"There are 7,000 people dying a day over there, many from AIDS, and many are dying unacceptably," he said.

He hopes to build partnerships between large, financially robust hospices in the U.S. with smaller, startup programs in Africa, where the American counterparts can offer money and staff members to help the smaller, poorer nations build their hospice program.

DiSorbo is joining an organization he helped found six years ago after a trip to Africa where he saw the lack of end-of-life services.

The group exists under the auspices of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, and has enough momentum to hire its first director, said J. Donald Schumacher, the president of NHPCO.

Hospice care, in which doctors help dying patients control their pain, and social workers counsel patients and families, began in the United States in the early 1970s.

By 1974, Hospice of Schenectady was one of the first in the country to conduct a public education campaign about hospice as an "end-of-life service."

General Electric Co., then headquartered in Schenectady, became the first company in the nation to provide a hospice benefit for employees.

DiSorbo said the hospice movement was a reaction to the growing dissatisfaction people were feeling about watching loved ones die in hospitals, often in pain and hooked to machines.

In a hospice program, the terminally ill can die at home, while social workers and counselors encourage spiritual growth and doctors help manage pain.

In Africa, DiSorbo said, his first priority will be to provide basic pain and symptom management. Right now, he said, too many people suffer needlessly.

Even in places like South Africa, where large cities have relatively sophisticated hospices, rural communities don't have much in the way of end-of-life services, DiSorbo said.

According to the United Nations' annual report on AIDS/HIV, sub-Saharan Africa remains at the center of the global epidemic. Close to 24.5 million people in that region have HIV or AIDS, including a million children.

While hospitals and clinics will work on treatment, DiSorbo will make sure someone is there for those who have no chance for recovery.

State Sen. Hugh Farley, who has known DiSorbo for three decades, said DiSorbo has the skills to build the partnerships between rich and poor hospices. Farley, R-Niskayuna, introduced the first hospice legislation in the nation in 1979 that defined the services as a regular health care benefit.

"I've worked with (DiSorbo) closely over the years, and I am utterly confident in his success," Farley said.

DiSorbo is wasting no time starting his new job. His last day at Community Hospice, which is now based in Rensselaer, was June 21, and he was set to begin his new post in Alexandria the next day.

When asked why he didn't give himself a break between jobs, he smiled.

"This isn't work," he said. "I don't think about it as a job."

Higgins can be reached at 454-5523 or by e-mail at dhiggins@timesunion.com.

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