

From the YakimaHerald.com Online News.

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Published on Monday, November 12, 2007

Hospital's hospice program reaches out

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YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

When social worker Esther Arredondo arrived at Yakima's Home Care and Hospice five years ago, she saw something missing: Hispanic patients.

Like most minority groups, Hispanic families weren't utilizing the hospice services available at Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital to care for their terminally ill relatives.

Arredondo and others at Memorial Hospital have set out to change that.

She and her co-workers have been meeting with members of the clergy in Central Washington to promote the benefits of hospice care, encouraging them to let parishioners and church members know that services are available for patients who are in the last stage of their life. A seminar was held at the Sunnyside Community Center in September, and there are plans to have more.

Because many people go to their spiritual leaders for advice on end-of-life care, Arredondo says talking to clergy is the best way to get information to the Hispanic community. She's also been spreading the word to Spanish-speaking residents via Spanish-language radio shows.

Although the numbers have climbed slightly in the last few years, the number of Hispanic patients served by the Yakima hospice program remains small. Memorial's Home Care and Hospice is currently assisting 85 terminally ill patients, two of whom are Hispanic. A few others are Filipino and American Indian.

Arredondo worries that Hispanics who need an extra hand aren't taking it because of fears and misinformation.

"They're struggling, feeling like there's nobody out there to help them," she said.

The lack of Hispanics using hospice services isn't exclusive to the Yakima Valley.

Nationwide, 1.2 million terminally ill people received hospice services in 2005, but only 4.8

percent were Hispanic, according to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization in Virginia. Those numbers represented a slight increase from 2003, when only 4.3 percent of the 950,000 people served were Hispanic.

Most hospice patients are Anglo, but there are efforts to attract more Hispanics and other minorities, including African Americans and Asians, said the national organization's spokesman Jon Radulovic.

The organization has worked with the Washington, D.C.-based National Alliance for Hispanic Health to provide Hispanic communities with information on hospice benefits. The two organizations also are reminding people that Medicaid and Medicare typically cover the cost of hospice care.

"Hospice has been trying to reach out," Radulovic said.

The outreach efforts include trying to clear up cultural misconceptions and earn trust from a community that has little faith in the medical field. Radulovic said some minorities don't trust doctors because of bad experiences with health care.

He said many families also believe hospice is like a nursing home, where an elderly person may feel as though they've been left by their relatives to die in strange surroundings.

This summer, Memorial announced it would step up its own outreach efforts to local Hispanics after winning state approval to build a 20-bed, \$6.9 million hospice care center, the first of its kind in Yakima.

Tentative plans call for the first 12 beds to open at the new center in 2010.

Hospice centers allow patients to live out their final days in a comfortable surrounding while also having quick access to medical care. Kitchens, gardens, spare bedrooms and other amenities allow families to live as fully as possible outside an institutional setting.

More than 80 percent of hospice care in the U.S., however, is usually provided in the person's home.

For patients who have been diagnosed by a doctor as being in the last six months of their lives, Memorial offers support services through its hospice workers, who visit private homes, nursing homes and hospital rooms. Memorial markets its program as one that helps not just the patient, but the family; after a patient dies, family members are eligible for counseling services for up to 13 months.

The Rev. Virgilio Zea of St. Joseph Parish in Yakima, who frequently visits ill Hispanic church

members to deliver the Eucharist, said there's a reluctance among older parishioners to leave the familiarity of their homes, many of which are decorated with photos of their youth and children.

"Look at their home, you'll see the family keepsakes," Zea said. "Take them out their home," he said, and they may lose their will to live.

Arredondo tries to allay those fears by pointing out that in-home hospice care can be provided in the patient's own bedroom. And families can control their privacy, she says, by determining the amount of help they'll accept from hospice social workers and volunteers.

Dr. Jane Delgado, president and CEO National Alliance for Hispanic Health, said language barriers and fears that a person may be giving up too soon on medical cures has made it difficult to persuade Hispanics to use hospice care.

Hospice assures terminally ill relatives who are receiving medicines and treatments that they can be comfortable and as pain-free as possible during their last stages in life. In addition to medical treatment, Delgado said, the patients get spiritual guidance and support to help cope with their imminent death.

Hospice employees and volunteers also provide relatives a break from the stress and exhaustion experienced by family caregivers.

"It's very exhausting physically, emotionally and spiritually to take care of someone who's very ill," said Delgado, a psychologist. "We (Hispanics) like to take care of our own. It's a strength of our community, but we have to know when to get help."

**For more information on local hospice services, contact:**

\* Yakima Valley Memorial's Home Care and Hospice at 574-3600. To learn about volunteering, contact volunteer coordinator Julie Fraser.

\* Su Familia Helpline with the National Alliance for Hispanic Health at 866-783-2645. You can also visit [www.hispanichealth.org](http://www.hispanichealth.org).

\* National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization at 800-658-8898. You can also visit [www.nhpco.org](http://www.nhpco.org)

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