Volunteering For Hospice

With the help of volunteers, hospice provides care and to over one million people and their families every year. The functions of a hospice volunteer vary to meet the needs of persons living with severe illness or debilitation. In addition, a volunteer may offer support through community outreach, fundraising, or office work.

Hospice Volunteers: Helping People Live to the Fullest

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Wherever hospice volunteers serve, they perform essential functions. Without them, hospice organizations would not be able to provide the level care and support which draws so many to volunteer in the first place. Those who volunteer serve both patients and their loved ones by providing much-needed empathy and companionship during the end of life process. Volunteers also contribute by engaging in community outreach
activities and raising funds to continue the mission of each hospice care organization. Most volunteers derive immense satisfaction and pride from the knowledge that their work is so important to the lives of patients, their loved ones, and their community.

Hospice Helps Life Go On

By providing excellent medical expertise and support to those with life-limiting conditions, hospice care has come to set the standard of palliative care for those who face debilitating conditions and require expert care and assistance. For the families and friends of those in need, hospice provides services and support to alleviate some of the struggles associated with their family member or loved one’s condition. Because hospice care is primarily directed towards providing care rather than a cure, most hospice work occurs in the homes of patients, although services are also provided through hospitals, nursing homes and/or other long-term residence facilities, and in centers explicitly devoted to providing hospice care.

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The mission and focus of hospice treatment is to ensure the best possible quality of life for patients and assure their families and loved ones. It is our belief that each person has the right to die pain-free and with personal dignity. Fulfilling that mission also requires a great deal of support and assistance to the family and loved ones of those in hospice care. Service is made available to persons of any age, race, religion, or medical condition and is covered by Medicare, Medicaid, HMO’s, as well as most other private insurance and managed care providers.

Hospice Volunteer Training

Hospice provides training to all volunteers, thus ensuring that each is prepared to fulfill the tasks required of them. Depending on a volunteer’s function in the organization, training may vary in length, but in general all volunteers will be instructed in the following:

- The mission and philosophy of hospice care.
- Comprehensive understanding of the services provided by hospice care.
- Emotional, spiritual, social, and physical issues associated with preparing for one’s end of life.
- Best practices, procedures, and precautions for providing the necessary individual and emotional support to family and loved ones after a hospice patient dies, including emergency procedures.
- General understanding of common life-limiting and chronic illnesses and injuries which will be encountered often in hospice environments.
- Communication skills which are necessary and effective for serving both the patient and their family in the most helpful and compassionate manner that can be achieved.
- Relevant issues surrounding interpersonal and family relationships.
- Appropriate boundaries of interaction for the hospice volunteer and patients, as well as their families.
- A basic understanding of the end of life process itself, as well as loss and grief.

Hospice Volunteers Do More Than You Might Expect

Hospice volunteers help in more ways than you might think. Some of the compassionate services they provide can include:

- Listening to the patient when they express themselves.
- Providing a presence of comfort and support.
- Participating in one of the patient’s favorite pastimes, for example playing chess or watching the news and discussing it.
- Being responsive to hospice staff and informing them of the patient’s or family’s needs.
- Performing errands or housework for the patient of family.
- Being respectful and supportive when patients share their life experiences.
- Transporting the patient to and from the grocery or a
doctor’s appointment.
- Assisting with hygiene/personal care (i.e. moving chair to bed or bathing), to the degree that the volunteer has proper training to do so.
- Accommodating the needs of a caregiver to take care of him/herself.

Behind the Scenes: Administrative Support

Not all hospice volunteers deal primarily with patient care, they also help out in the office doing any of the following:

- Working in a thrift shop.
- Coordinate support services.
- Fundraising.
- Answering the phone.
- Mailings, photocopying, and data entry.

Volunteering is Easy, How Do You Do It?

The first step to becoming a volunteer is to research the local hospice community in your area. Some areas will have many different local providers and each maintains its own policy on who is eligible to volunteer. Many will have more than one center and you will have to set up an interview with your local program. Be prepared to answer these questions:

- Why do you want to volunteer and what is your availability?
- What experience you have caring for persons nearing their end of life?

Hospice staff will ask you to complete an application form, possibly provide a current resume and references, and after
that, you’re training can begin!