Hospice Home Care Helps Families Stay Together During Challenging Time

When a family member is diagnosed with limited life expectancy, he or she often has a strong desire to spend the final days in the comfort of home. Comfort, touch and togetherness are among the key elements made possible by Hospice of the Western Reserve’s home care teams. Yet these same principles are also in direct opposition to the distance and separation asked of all health care providers during a pandemic.

Despite these challenges, HWR’s home care teams continue to provide holistic support and symptom management during the pandemic by incorporating process modifications and technology to reduce the risk of exposure to patients, families, and hospice staff. In fact, more than 97% of all care provided by HWR is in the home or community setting.

In-person visits are still conducted by the nurse during the admissions process, and whenever they are needed to manage uncontrolled symptoms. Hospice nursing assistants (HNAs) visit the home to help with the patient’s personal care and the tasks of daily living. During home care visits, the nurse and HNA follow CDC guidelines, arriving at the home wearing a mask, gown and gloves.

Telehealth capabilities allow HWR’s nurse, social worker and spiritual care coordinator to conduct video-based visits and maintain regular weekly contact while maintaining social distancing protocols. Additional services, such as social work, spiritual care, art and music therapy can be offered remotely through video visits or telephone check-ins.

Hospice support staff – available 24 hours a day through a help line – are skilled at managing calls and providing appropriate care. If an emergent situation arises such as a new uncontrolled symptom, the hospice team will assess how to manage the circumstances, which may involve a home visit.

Virtual tools allow HWR team members to stay connected to help coordinate care when nursing homes, extended care facilities and hospitals must limit the number of visitors in their buildings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular telehealth contact enables the hospice home care team to provide caregiver education, ongoing guidance on medication and symptom control and spiritual and emotional support during an incredibly difficult time.
Hospice of the Western Reserve (HWR) recently added personalized text messaging as an option to support those who are grieving. The innovative new service is provided in collaboration with the Seattle-based company, Grief Coach. There is no cost to grieving hospice families. It complements other forms of grief support already provided, such as phone conversations with trained grief specialists, virtual support groups, a private Facebook group, newsletters and a library of online resources. HWR is a national leader in the provision of hospice care. Every year, its 15-person bereavement team provides grief support services for more than 6,000 hospice families as well as for the community at large.

Diane Snyder Cowan, Director of the Western Reserve Grief Services, learned about Grief Coach in December, and was impressed by the carefully crafted, thoughtful and personal texts delivered to people grieving suicide, cancer, overdose, stillbirth and many other deaths.

"With COVID limitations, our in-person visits and support groups are temporarily suspended. It’s wonderful that these caring, well-timed personal messages can now go out to all of our families," Snyder Cowan said. "They can add in their friends and family, too. Grief Coach gives our bereavement coordinators a way to ensure none of our family members have to grieve alone."

Hospice of the Western Reserve Achieves Highest Rating for Veterans Program

Hospice of the Western Reserve provides specialized care to veterans through its Peaceful & Proud program. This year, HWR was the first hospice in Northeast Ohio to achieve "Level 5 partner" status from We Honor Veterans (WHV), a joint initiative of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and the Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA). This designation – the highest level available – requires the completion of several activities, a greater emphasis on staff education and care plans addressing the complex needs of Vietnam Era and combat veterans. As a Level 5 partner, HWR also takes on the added role of serving as a regional mentor to other hospice organizations. Yearly recertification is required.

Virtual Options Keeping Vets Connected

One of the most meaningful aspects of Peaceful & Proud are the recognition ceremonies conducted by veteran volunteers for patients who are veterans. Patients are honored for their military service and presented with a commemorative certificate and pin. Although typically conducted in person, the ceremonies are virtual in 2020 to protect the wellbeing of patients, families and volunteers. Virtual ceremonies are arranged by volunteer service managers working remotely with clinical teams, veteran patients and their families. Following HIPPA regulations, veteran volunteers conduct the ceremonies using a secure telecommunications platform. Family members can witness the video ceremony live and interact with their loved one as they are being honored from multiple locations across the country. HWR's support during the pandemic extends to veterans in the community. This summer and fall, through a series of Virtual Veterans Cafés, veterans of all eras can come together, swap stories and enjoy each other's company using their cell phone, tablet, laptop or Smart TV.