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Hope Hospice

Meeting the needs of those facing the end of life

by **Jeb Bing**

With Medicare reimbursements decreasing next year and its number of end-of-life and family bereavement care up by 19 percent this year, Hope Hospice is among seven beneficiaries of the 2008 Pleasanton Weekly Holiday Fund that needs your help.

Last year, Hope Hospice received \$18,750 from the 2007 Holiday Fund, money that the nonprofit organization was able to use to hire more trained caregivers in comforting both those in their final days as well as the families of loved ones who also needed support as they went through heart-wrenching challenges.

"Including our bereavement clients, we provided end-of-life care to 912 individuals in our fiscal year that ended last June 30, compared to 429 the year before," said Ann Noll, director of patient services of the Tri-Valley's Hope Hospice organization. "We're seeing a significant increase in our patient and family care numbers both because of an aging population in the area we serve but also because care the general public is becoming better educated about hospice services and family doctors are recommending hospice care for their terminally-ill patients."

Organized 29 years ago, Hope Hospice in the Tri-Valley is an independent nonprofit not connected to any other hospice organization, although there are hundreds of similar groups throughout the country. It serves patients in Pleasanton, Castro Valley, Dublin, Livermore, San Ramon, Danville, Alamo and some areas farther north. For a number of years, the Dublin-based organization had a fundraising gift store in downtown Pleasanton, but closed that operation when its rent was increased and the store became unprofitable.

Its only fundraiser is the annual "Ship of Hope" gala, held earlier this year in the Blackhawk museum. Next year's event is scheduled for May 1.

Hope Hospice trains and provides volunteers to stay with patients during their final days and to provide family caregivers a break from what is often round-the-clock care. Their patients for the most part are over 75 years old, although care is also provided for patients 18 and

older. There's also a separate organization in the Bay Area that provides pediatric care for younger patients, a service that requires special state licenses and training.

Although Hope Hospice is generally known for its end-of-life care, a major component of the organization helps family members and others whose loved ones are nearing life's end.

"It's a major challenge," said Kathy Padro, communications coordinator for Hope Hospice. "Sad to say, there are many young families that have to deal with end-of-life of situations with a loved one. We provide care for them and especially help prepare children for the end."

"It's a major challenge," Padro added. "These younger families have a lot of needs. They're not ready for their loved one to leave this earth; it's very difficult for them to face."

Padro said Hope Hospice has bereavement counselors specially trained to handle the emotional needs of children. They try to meet with children in the family's home so that the counselors and the kids can develop a familiarity while the loved one is still alive.

"They build a relationship with the children and really help prepare them for what's coming, and they also help the rest of the family members as well," she said. "We work with them after their loved one has died, which is why it's important to build a rapport and establish a relationship ahead of time while the patient is still alive."

Added Noll: "People think this is a very difficult and challenging job but it's actually very rewarding. Our team members focus on the positive and emphasize the quality of life and what's important for that patient and family members. We really focus on making it the best that it can be."

Comfort care, often called palliative care, is provided in the patient's home, where most prefer to be. The goal is to do whatever is possible to keep the patient as free of pain and discomfort as possible and to allow the individual to live out his life in dignity and surrounded by loved ones.

Often, that includes pets--dogs, cats, even birds. Noll recalled the final days of Chuck Stockley, whose wife Allison brought a small poppy to her husband's bedside. "Todi" quickly became Chuck's constant companion, Noll recalled, and was the center of his world when family members were away.

Pets also become a challenge for hospice workers and family caregivers, especially when the patient can no longer care for the animal. Identifying this new need in patient care, Hope Hospice developed a partnership agreement with the Valley Humane Society to provide pet care during the patient's final days and, just as important, to assure the patient that the pet would be safely cared for as long as it lived, too.

One of the benefits of the partnership is a ready source of advice on dealing with patients' pets, said Jennie Oliveiro, a Hope Hospice nurse.

"Most of the nurses here have pets of their own and can share pet stories with the patient," Oliveiro said. "I feel pets represent a huge aspect of emotional strength for our patients and our families. And, if a patient must have care outside the home, we have worked with the family and the facility to make sure the pet can come for visits."

Socorro Peebles, a Hope Hospice home health aide added: "We had a patient who was declining. He lived alone and would wake up finding his dog sleeping on his lap, face to face."

"Usually, in a patient's final hours, the pet is right there by their side," Peebles said. "Sometimes, they behave strangely or whine all day and you just know that they sense the end is near."

Another patient, Marion, a 90-year-old terminally ill patient in the Tri-Valley area, had only three wishes: to remain in her own home for the rest of her time, to have her little dog Spunky by her side till the end and for her dog to be adopted into a loving, life-long home after she was gone.

"This dog is my life." she said. "I would not be alive without her...without her unconditional love."

In accepting the patient's goal to remain at home with her pet, the Hope Hospice team was prepared to do everything possible to prevent Marion from being transferred to a nursing home. But how to implement a care plan that included Spunky was going to be quite difficult. Marion's caregivers were working 24 hours around the clock, and were unable to leave the patient's side to tend to the dog throughout the day.

At this point, the Valley Humane Society became a key factor in the patient's overall care plan, with its own volunteers walking and feeding the dog regularly and the Society finding a loving home for Spunky which Marion knew about, and approved, before she died.

Although funds from the Holiday Fund will help meet Hope Hospice's training, bereavement and other unfunded services, the organization also needs more volunteers. Requirements vary from fully-trained volunteers to help with medication and other personal needs of very ill patients to caregivers who can spend a few hours a day giving family members a break.

"There are a lot of ways people can bring their gifts and talents to Hope Hospice to help us meet our commitment to serve Pleasanton and other cities," Padro said.

To learn more, call 829-8770 or check online at www.hopehospice.com.