

Hospice Niagara Growing Compassionate Communities

BY SANDRA VLAAR INGRAM

The traditional role of hospice palliative care is poised to undergo a sea of change as factors drive shifting needs and expectations. It's not just the demographics—in Ontario alone, the number of seniors is expected to double by 2034—it's also the reality that people are more likely to experience multiple long-term chronic conditions than ever before, changing the trajectory of end-of-life care. Then there are evolving expectations, including people's increasing preference to remain at home.

Carol Nagy, executive director of Hospice Niagara, says these simultaneous challenges are some of the factors fueling the organization's increasing focus on enabling compassionate communities.

"Supporting compassionate communities means strengthening informal care networks that exist and promoting care as close to home as possible," explains Carol. "It's also about improving information channels about death, dying, grief and loss as a normal part of living. It's an exciting shift that builds upon the strengths in our communities."

The demand for increased home and community care has been widely detailed; in

Ontario, Patients First, a government discussion paper issued in 2015, triggered an extensive series of public and stakeholder consultations to provide input into what systemic reforms are needed. The resulting Patients First Act legislation, tabled in June, proposes sweeping changes that the government says will better integrate health systems, makes transitions between hospital, community care and other health services easier, and expand community-based care.

It's a long-term vision for systemic change; with a service area in our region of 400,000 people and just 10 residence-based beds available, Hospice Niagara is ready to embrace the changing palliative care dynamic, now.

"We are focused on building strong, sustainable, compassionate communities that give people the care they need, where they need it," says Carol. "This new model of compassionate communities is just starting to percolate, and Hospice Niagara is uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in this shift."

Carol points to the success of the organization's two dedicated Community Palliative Care Teams. Providing care within their clients' homes, these teams—one based in North Niagara and the other in South Niagara—work in partnership with Commu-

nity Care Access Centres (CCACs), and include palliative care physicians, nurse clinicians and nurse practitioners, psycho-spiritual clinicians, bereavement advisors and clinical navigators.

"We understand that a number of people prefer to stay in their own home as long as possible, and our Community Palliative Care Teams work with an individual's caregivers and health providers to meet their care needs and support their end-of-life choices," says Carol.

Supporting more than 2,500 people in their homes over the past three years, the Community Palliative Care Teams have significantly expanded the number of people that can access the support and services that Hospice Niagara provides. Another important aspect of the team's work is to grow the capacity of family doctors in the early identification of people who may benefit from palliative care support, as well as in the proactive management of their palliative clients.

Along with partnerships through the Community Palliative Care Teams, Hospice Niagara is working to close this gap in other ways. In a recently completed pilot project with the Niagara-on-the-Lake Family Health Team, Hospice Niagara provided 21 family practitioners with specialized palliative education including end-of-life trajectories for major illnesses. The results are encouraging.

"The doctors report that they are identifying people that will benefit from a palliative approach earlier," says Carol. "They are also making changes to their practice, such as adjusting appointments to allow more time

for advance care planning discussions and family involvement, and making house calls. These improvements mean a world of difference to a person who requires palliative care."

With the early progress of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Family Health Team, Hospice Niagara hopes to demystify palliative care for more family practices. The Family Health Team at the Prince Charles Medical Centre in Welland has indicated its interest in participating in the program, and Hospice Niagara is actively seeking more family health teams.

"There are thousands of people living with life-limiting illnesses or conditions within Niagara," says Carol. "When we are able to integrate hospice palliative care into the broader health care system, we are not only helping more people face the end-of-life journey feeling supported, we are strengthening our compassionate community."

About Hospice Niagara

The organization focuses on improving the quality of life for people living with life-limiting illnesses, death, dying, grief and loss. Through a variety of programs and services, Hospice Niagara is able to provide compassionate comfort and support to families throughout the care continuum. We rely on community support to provide these programs and services at no cost. **BL**

For more information, visit hospiceniagara.ca, email info@hospiceniagara.ca or call 905.984.8766. Stay connected through Facebook and Twitter or email news@hospiceniagara.ca to receive our eNewsletter.



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