

Hospice care can benefit COVID-19 patients, ease stress on medical providers, health care experts say

By Nancy Cutler, Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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Coronavirus has changed the entire health care continuum. That impact can be seen in hospice, too, providers say, including limits on in-person counseling to a growing need for end-of-life support.

Hospice and palliative care should be part of the discussion for COVID-19 patients, experts in the field say. Too often, they say, it's not.

"The only way you can die surrounded by your loved ones is home hospice, now all other (medical facilities) are on lockdown," said National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization President and CEO Edo Banach. "I do wish that the story would be better told. There really is a compelling case for people who have the desire to die at home surrounded by their loved ones."

United Hospice of Rockland CEO Amy Stern also believes hospice has a valuable role in the coronavirus pandemic. The kind of medical treatments that palliative care often includes — managing shortness of breath, agitation, pain — overlaps with the kind of care a terminal coronavirus patient would need, she said.

"When you think about it, it makes sense," said Stern, who retires next month from the agency she has led for 31 years. "We take care of people at the end of life. Although most people are recovering from COVID, there are a significant bunch of folks who don't."

Coronavirus has also fast-tracked the relationship that hospices forge with families. What once occurred over weeks or months now happens in hours or days, Stern said. “We’re having to figure out how to develop relationships a lot faster,” Stern said.

‘Hospice is about getting close’

Palliative care is a specialty, Stern said, just like gastroenterology or obstetrics. Not every physician should be expected to have a breadth of knowledge about best practices.

End-of-life care is not an absence of care. “It’s not about what we don’t do,” Stern said of her medical team. “It’s about what we do do to maintain comfort.”

Banach said soaring COVID-19 fatalities stress families and health care workers alike.

The constant death and traumatic care strains the health-care workforce, Banach said, as witnessed in reported suicides of doctors, EMTs and other providers.

More access to palliative care — including broader Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements and flexibility — would conserve precious resources and ease the emotional burden on everyone.

“It is difficult to prognosticate under ordinary circumstances and often impossible with COVID-19,” he said.

Banach participated Thursday afternoon in an address by President Trump on “Protecting America’s Seniors.”

COVID-19 poses more than just monetary challenges to hospice delivery.

Hospice of Westchester has found access restrictions in nursing homes challenging.

“The hospice team is pretty decimated because of the constraints the nursing facilities have placed upon us,” said Carol Townsend-Ross, director of critical operations at Hospice of Westchester.

“Social workers, volunteers are crucial to what we do,” Townsend-Ross said. The restrictions are “creating a very lonely existence for the patient, the family, and the team at the skilled nursing facility.” Spiritual counseling, social worker visits and even physician evaluations are now often done via Facetime.

“We tend as a society to undervalue care that’s provided by a social worker or therapist and overvalue care that’s provided by an institution,” Banach of NHPCO said.

“During the pandemic it’s all about social distancing. Hospice is about getting close, giving comfort,” said United Hospice of Rockland COO Cara Pace, who will take the CEO position when Stern officially retires. Hospice of Rockland also serves Orange County.

Pace said the medical staff has become “creative” with delivery of care and social-distancing regulations. “But our nurses haven’t missed a beat.”

‘Difficult conversations’

The coronavirus epidemic underscores the importance of having end-of-life care discussions, said Dr. Adam D. Jarrett, executive vice president and Chief Medical Officer at Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck, New Jersey. People with serious and complicated medical conditions don’t fare well during and after ventilation, which is a traumatic experience.

Jarrett, in an interview with NorthJersey.com, said hospice and palliative care are key when considering a “comfortable death.”

United Hospice of Rockland runs the 10-bed Joe Raso Hospice Residence and provides in-home hospice care in Rockland and Orange counties. The agency also provides hospice care in local hospitals,

nursing homes, and assisted living centers.

“Now, even more so, they have been involved in helping to have difficult conversations,” Stern said of her team who support both family and medical staff.

Banach said that the smaller hospice agencies in his national organization struggle to get their hands on enough protective gear and upgrade telemedicine systems and other social-distancing measures, and to pay for it.

United Hospice of Rockland has had to dedicate extra staff to acquire protective gear, Stern said, and pay premium prices at times. The agency has even had orders for protective gear confiscated by FEMA. But, she said, the agency has plenty of PPE to protect all staff.

On Wednesday, there was one patient in the Raso residence’s separate COVID wing. That wing has a separate staff, and separate supply storage.

Other safety measures are being taken: All who come onto the property are screened for COVID-19 risk factors, including having their temperature taken.

Visitors are limited to just one person at a time, something Stern said had received some pushback from families, even though it’s more than most other medical facilities are now allowing.

“That one visitor has been a huge positive for families who have a loved one who is dying,” Stern said.

Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter at [@nancyrockland](https://twitter.com/nancyrockland). Support local journalism; go to lohud.com/specialoffer to find out how.