

National Hospice and Palliative Care Month:
Time to Celebrate the Best Kept Secret in American Healthcare

An Op-Ed by Malene Davis, MBA, MSN, RN, CHPN

More than three decades ago, Congress recognized that too many seniors faced their last days in hospitals that were not equipped to provide specialized end-of-life care. An alternative approach was needed, and the Medicare Hospice Benefit we enjoy today was enacted into law in 1982. Since its inception, this program has been one of the most highly praised features of American healthcare, with almost universally high satisfaction ratings, both from patients and their families.

The most common complaint about hospice continues to be, “Why didn’t we know about this sooner?”

We are grateful that a vast majority of hospice care is provided at no cost to patients and families thanks to the foresight of Congressional leaders. Capital Caring, the largest and oldest hospice and palliative care provider in the mid-Atlantic region, served as a hospice demonstration project in the early 1980s and is proud to remain partners with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) as we seek to provide—and measure the outcomes of – world-class care offered to those living with advanced illness.

This year, Capital Caring in the nation’s capital, along with our colleagues in my home state at West Virginia Caring, are proudly celebrating our 40th anniversary of compassionate caring for patients and their families. We continue to advocate with leaders at CMS to ensure the hospice benefit is administered with uniformly high standards, adhering to the intent of the benefit, throughout every

community, and that reimbursements are paid in a timely manner for services provided by adherent hospice care programs.

We must all work together to recognize that managing advanced illness and end-of-life care requires a special touch and a unique approach that we describe as comfort care. Not only does this benefit patients directly, but it also aids their caregivers. At Capital Caring and at West Virginia Caring, nearly all of our patients report significant pain reduction within 48 hours of coming into our care, thereby allowing them to spend time focusing their attention on friends, family, and loved ones.

While a vast majority of our care is provided in our patients' homes, we recognize that home is not always an ideal environment. Capital Caring offers more than 50 acute care inpatient beds in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia; these beds are located in facilities that provide round-the-clock care to our patients whose symptoms cannot be managed at home. And our unique TeleCaring™ program, also offered by West Virginia Caring to all of its patients, consists of twice-daily proactive calls to each patient's home so we are aware of any needs that might arise, even when our clinical teams are not present.

Founded in 1977, Capital Caring is one of the oldest and most experienced non-profit hospices in the United States. With nearly 75 years of combined experience, Capital Caring and West Virginia Caring have always focused on simply improving care for each of the moms and dads (and kids) we care for every day. While we focus on alleviating pain, anxiety, breathlessness, and all causes of distress, we also equip families and loved ones with the tools they need to feel confident in their own ability to comfort their loved ones. With the continued support of our friends in Congress, at CMS, and medical professionals from coast to coast, we look forward to many more decades of simply improving care for our neighbors.

My personal and professional passion is not to have families continue to lament, "Why didn't we know about hospice earlier?" I hope that honest dialogues about our healthcare choices are not relegated to business board rooms and

Congressional cloakrooms, but instead transition to our family living rooms and dining rooms.

Let's start making that happen this November during National Hospice and Palliative Care Month and increase awareness and access to these valuable and viable care options.

=====

Malene Davis, MBA, MSN, RN, CHPN, is President & CEO of Capital Caring and West Virginia Caring. She can be reached at MDavis@capitalcaring.org.