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# New type of volunteer program aims to improve quality of life

Leslie Cholowsky  
Editor

Nav-CARE started in 2016 as a research project, piloted in Killam and Camrose. It connects volunteers with individuals with advanced chronic illness. Short for "Navigating, Accessing, Resourcing, and Engaging," the goal of the program is to improve the quality of life for these individuals.

Wendy Duggleby, a University of Alberta researcher, and Barb Pesut, from University of BC, conducted a study of a new volunteer program.

Another reason why the pilots were deemed a success was successful pairings between volunteers and clients.

Volunteers for Nav-CARE undergo training that allows them to understand the challenges faced by seniors in their community.

Duggleby says, "Client confidentiality is also stressed in volunteer training.

"It's not an easy task, especially in a small close-knit community. But even when people asking for information

have the best of intentions, our volunteers are taught how to redirect."

She says volunteers are given key tools in training, adding: "Having good listening skills is key. The volunteers should ask the client every day, 'What is the most important thing to you today?'"

Wanita Toews, who acted as nurse navigator for the pilot, and is still a volunteer for the program, says, "We have been successful in keeping people at home, there are resources out there, and we are helping people connect with them."

Another volunteer says because her client was

Joy LeBlanc, Volunteer Coordinator for the Hospice Society of Camrose, says couples make great volunteers. She'd love to see more men in the program.

able to access much-needed assistance through the program, "I've seen a real change in her quality of life."

Toews says that sometimes clients will tell volunteers what's happening or what they need help with before they are likely to tell family or friends.

"Often help can be sought and a problem solved before family is even aware. In some cases, a volunteer can help clients sort out 'next steps,' and by having someone to talk to, can calm fears of the unknown."

Volunteers and clients benefit from Nav-CARE, one volunteer says, "It's been great meeting my client, and becoming friends." Another volunteer says, "Many people don't have anyone close, but

with this program there's somebody there who is not a stranger when they need it," another volunteer says.

Volunteers are not expected to solve their client's problems, they are trained to help them connect with existing resources who are experts.

After the pilot, the Hospice Society of Camrose and District took over both programs in the fall of 2017.

Tammy Lang, local health care worker, says the Hospice Society is definitely making a difference she's seen with her own eyes. "I am continually amazed at the extent of their programming and the varying ways they work to support individuals."

Those interested in becoming Nav-CARE volunteers have an opportunity to take their training locally, as the Hospice Society is holding a training session in Sedgewick on March 29, 30, and 31.

Joy LeBlanc is the Hospice Society's Volunteer Coordinator. She says the Nav-CARE project was a great fit for

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# Nav-Care

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the Hospice Society, "It is allowing us to get involved earlier in the process, to start building links with our clients and their families. That's one thing hospice volunteers wanted."

She says from the start, the Society was very interested in the pilot, and nine hospice volunteers participated in it that first year.

LeBlanc says that Nav-CARE also enriches the ability to access hospice care, as she can have clients referred by doctors, or agencies, and also by families, or even call themselves.

Hospice volunteers are trained to help in Nav-CARE, palliative care, end-of-life care, and bereavement care, she says, but absolutely get to choose how they will work within the program.

LeBlanc says she would like to see more volunteers from the Flagstaff Region, not limiting the 'Killam' program to just one town. She even has some Viking volunteers within the program.

The training session, scheduled for the end of March, is required for all those wanting to be volunteers. There's no cost to attend the training, and LeBlanc says, "I hope you can get me some men."

"We get clients from a variety of walks of life. Farmers like to talk to

farmers, for example. We need to find a wide range of volunteers. Sometimes common experiences are the link that makes you able to talk to someone."

LeBlanc says loneliness is a problem with seniors more and more these days. "Some don't have families nearby, or perhaps their family members have passed on.

"End of life care is so much easier if you've already connected to the person through Nav-CARE or palliative care."

She's grateful for the support the programs receive from The Bethany Group and local hospitals.

"We also have a great relationship with home-care.

"Our volunteers help our people navigate the system."

She says some people have doubts about whether they will fit in the program. "If you're looking at it, I think you already have the heart for it." Sometimes she finds that volunteers have an easier time if they buddy up with another volunteer, or if she has a couple volunteer together. She wants the volunteer's needs met as well. "My job is to support the volunteers."

She still holds monthly support meetings where volunteers can talk about their experiences, sharing challenges and success stories. "Our volunteers are so supportive of one another. If you want to grow old in a supportive community, become a Hospice volunteer!"

LeBlanc says, "I would love to see lots of people

coming out to the training in Sedgewick, and I would also love to see a wide variety of volunteers. We presently have volunteers from age 20 to in their 70s, and we value all ages."

She says if being a direct volunteer doesn't appeal to someone, but they support the program, there are other ways to help the hospice. "If face-to-face care isn't for you, the skills you already have may benefit the hospice in other ways.

"Volunteers are always saying to me, 'We get back more than we give,' but I don't know how that can be, given the incredibly giving individuals we have in our program, but they insist it's true.

"Our programs allow you to build an interactive relationship. It's not all one-sided, you do get cared for in turn by your client."

If someone is unsure about volunteering, but thinks they may be interested, she urges them to give her a call for more information.



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