

Business

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Bringing compassion to end-of-life care

By Robbie Dingeman

Hospice Hawai'i exists to help patients and families "experience a meaningful end-of-life journey."

President Ken Zeri said the No. 1 complaint most people have once they connect with hospice is "how come I didn't know about this sooner?"

Probably the biggest misconception, he said, is that people don't have to wait so long to get their loved ones into the specialized care that most often keeps people in their homes.

"It's not brink-of-death care," Zeri said.

The organization's mission is "to bring hope, reduce fears and impact lives," with a team of professionals that includes nurses, social workers, doctors, case managers, volunteers and others.

Even as patients do near the end of their lives, "they can actually avoid going back into the hospital," he said.

"The social and emotional aspects of care of the family are just as important as providing good pain

PROFILE

HOSPICE HAWAII

Number of employees: 95, a combination of full- and part-time

How long in business: Since 1979

Describe your business: "We're health care, so we're providing care to individuals who are generally in their last months of life as well as providing care for their family."

Work philosophy: "It's all about relationships; the characteristics of those relationships are openness and honesty and approaching our work with integrity."

Business survival tips: "Focus on your mission. Understand your economic engine. Operate with integrity."

Fun fact: Hospice Hawai'i president Ken Zeri is a registered nurse by profession, but started as a fireman/emergency medical technician and is a chef in his spare time.

Best way to contact: www.HospiceHawaii.org, or 24-hour line: 924-9255.

relief."

Zeri, 52, said working with the whole family is crucial. "They're on that journey together with that patient."

And caught up in the medical care, anxiety and planning, families feel like they are in a hurricane. Hospice seeks to be the eye of the storm — a place of peace and care.

"They don't have to be afraid," Zeri said. "We've got a whole bunch of great people on our staff and our volunteers who can help."

And he said that care goes deeper than "are you taking your medicine, how's your breathing, etc."

"As a nurse, I'm able to assess coping and the dimensions of suffering," he said. Social workers take them to deeper levels of understanding, "sometimes helping heal old wounds."

Zeri said the staff of the hospice is special, and members develop a rapport with the patients but feel privileged to help so much in their profession.

"We know that those that we care for are ultimately not going to survive," he said.

"That means success is measured by not only the relief of suffering but giving the patient and family an opportunity to see that their life had meaning," Zeri said.

"When an individual is facing the last days of their life, it is a time for tremendous reflection," he said.

Zeri said the average time in hospice is now six to seven weeks. About 600 patients were served on O'ahu last year.

Usually people hear about hospice through their doctors, but Zeri hopes that more people will call and find out what help they can find.

"About a quarter of our patients that we see die within the first week of care," he said, because referrals come so late.

"Our job is to walk with them, guide them when they need," Zeri said.

After 24 years, Zeri still loves what he does and it helps him to not fret about the small stuff.

"It doesn't matter what the shirt looks like that I have on; what matters is how did I treat that person that I'm with.

"Why do we do this? We do this because we get to be there," Zeri said. "We make a difference."

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