

ZEN HOSPICE PROJECT

*San Francisco, California*

Well-trained volunteer caregivers and the simple human kindness they can deliver are the key elements of Zen Hospice Project's success in giving dying patients and their families a life-transforming experience.

Zen Hospice Project partners with others to provide its patients with the medical care they need in its two San Francisco settings. In one, a Victorian home that can house five patients, Hospice by the Bay provides the medical component. At the other, Laguna Honda Hospital, a large public long-term care facility that hosts a 26-bed hospice unit, hospital staff provide the medical care. The residence gives care to 50 to 60 patients and their families each year, while the hospice at Laguna Honda serves about 100 in the course of a year.

The organization's 130 volunteer caregivers, a number of whom are not practicing Zen Buddhists, spend long hours with dying patients. "What the volunteer caregiver brings is a level of compassionate care and simple human kindness," explains Executive Director Anthony Turney. "It's not required to be busy, or 'do' much; just being present is enough, sitting with someone who is going through this amazing transition that is such a mystery."

Volunteer caregivers work weekly five-hour shifts, which may involve doing laundry and making meals at the



residence in addition to being present at the bedside of residents. At Laguna Honda, they primarily provide comfort through companionship.

The screening process for volunteer caregivers is rigorous, and roughly just half of applicants are accepted. Applicants suffering a recent loss or experiencing a change in job or marital status are encouraged to re-apply in six to 12 months, and those who express a calling to help people die well are often rejected.

"We need to be very sure that the individuals who offer themselves really do have the capacity to understand what end-of-life care is about, what will go on with the residents, and what will go on with them," Turney says. "We need to be careful to ensure that the volunteer caregivers that do come to us are able to take on this very extraordinary work."

A 40-hour training program gives volunteer caregivers an in-depth understanding of what they are about to experience. Jennifer Block, director of Programs and Spiritual Care, was herself a volunteer caregiver six years ago. "You move from excitement to

trepidation, and through willingness, surprise, grief, joy; it's really a spectrum." Block says, "Volunteer caregivers might be healing their own grief of lost family members or in the process of becoming prepared for their own old age, sickness, and death. They gain a feeling of usefulness and making a contribution to others."

One ultimate goal of Zen Hospice Project is to affect the outside world through the experiences of its volunteer caregivers. "The values our volunteer caregivers embody go out with them to the community," Turney says. "That's very hard to articulate and impossible to measure, but it's a residual effect we trust in."



INNOVATION HIGHLIGHTS

DE-MEDICALIZATION OF DYING PROCESS

INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING HEALTH SYSTEM

VOLUNTEER SCREENING/TRAINING PROCESS