

HOSPICE OF THE PLAINS

Wray, Colorado

When you're working in the far reaches of rural Colorado, care planning for a hospice patient doesn't always mean resolving the uncomfortable symptoms of a serious illness. It might be a request to fix a squeaky fan or to take care of a farm-related chore.

In one case, a social worker from the Hospice of the Plains pulled up in front of a client's house and was met by his wife, who pointed to a farm truck full of seed. "It couldn't get wet," she said, noting the rain clouds on the horizon. "Can you move it into the barn?" she asked. "Sure thing," he replied.

"It's not only pain and symptom management," explains hospice Administrator Donna Roberts. "We're rural people to begin with. We'll arrange for volunteers to assist with harvest or to move cattle if necessary."

That comprehensive approach to hospice care is necessary in the very rural environment served by Hospice of the Plains, based in Wray, Colorado. The organization serves counties with populations as sparse as two people per square mile.

That flexibility also goes along with the hospice philosophy that end-of-life care is different from traditional medical care. "It's not a medical event, it's a life event," Roberts says of the dying process. "It's a transition as opposed to something to be feared."

Roberts, a registered nurse, runs an organization as lean as they get, relying primarily on per-diem nurses, who provide hospice services as an adjunct to their full-time jobs in local hospitals. "They have a hospice heart," Roberts



explains. The extra income comes in handy for nurses whose farming and ranching families have been hit hard by a seven-year drought. But they do it because they've grown up in the area and are committed to caring for their friends and neighbors they have known for years. "They have an altruistic desire to assist people in the terminal stages of their lives," she says.

The hospice has been licensed since 1996 and has survived in an area where others have failed. It serves approximately 44,000 people who live in the 8,000 square mile, five-county area that comprises northeastern Colorado. Last year, 88 people were served, which is a 2,200 percent increase over the first year. Referrals often come from families whose lives have been touched by hospice in the past.

Despite its limited resources, Hospice of the Plains is reaching out to other underserved rural areas to assist them in becoming hospice licensed. Two new hospices are now in operation thanks to assistance from Hospice of the Plains, which itself is expanding into an underserved area of rural western Nebraska.

Meanwhile, the hospice has received support from the Wray Community District Hospital, a critical access hospital that included office space for the hospice when the clinic addition was recently built.

The organization has survived, and thrived, with community support, assistance from donors, the time and expertise given by Volunteer Medical Directors, the trust and referrals of physicians and providers practicing throughout the hospice service area, and a committed group of volunteers and employees. "We grew up with some of these folks or have known them for much of our lives," says Roberts. "It's an honor and privilege to serve them and to be intrinsically connected to the community."



INNOVATION HIGHLIGHTS

CREATIVE FRONTIER HOSPICE STAFFING MODEL

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

STRONG COMMITMENT TO BEING WHEREVER NEEDED (OVER 8,000 SQUARE MILES)