2025 CIRCLE OF LIFE AWARDS

CELEBRATING

INNOVATION

IN PALLIATIVE AND END-OF-LIFE CARE



ABOUT THE AWARD

The Circle of Life Award: Celebrating Innovation in Palliative and End-of-Life Care recognizes programs that care for patients with serious or life-limiting illnesses. Major sponsors for the 2025 awards are the American Hospital Association and the Catholic Health Association. The awards are co-sponsored by the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, the Center to Advance Palliative Care, the Hospice & Palliative Nurses Association/Nurses Foundation/Credentialing Center, and the National Association of Social Workers. The award is directed and staffed by the American Hospital Association's Field Engagement team. The award winners were recognized in July at the AHA Leadership Summit.

For more information about the award, visit www.aha.org/circleoflife.

SENIOR EDITOR: Suzanna Hoppszallern

WRITER: Lola Butcher

COPY EDITOR: Susan Edge-Gumbel

DESIGNER: Chuck Lazar

2025 CIRCLE OF LIFE COMMITTEE

CHAIR

Martha L. Twaddle, M.D., FACP, FAAHPM, HMDC
The Waud Family Medical Directorship, Palliative Medical & Supportive Care
Clinical Professor of Medicine, Northwestern Medicine

MEMBERS

Karen Bullock, Ph.D., LCSW, APHSW-C, FGSA Louise McMahon Ahearn Endowed Professor of Social Work Boston College

Constance Dahlin, MSN, ANP-BC, ACHPN, FPCN, FAAN
Palliative Nurse Practitioner, Mass General Brigham — Salem Hospital
Consultant, Center to Advance Palliative Care

Deirdre Downes, LCSW

Corporate Director of Social Work and Supportive Care Programs Isabella Geriatric Center

Steve Francy

President, Franey & Associates CEO, Madrone Care Network

Darren M. Henson, Ph.D., STL Senior Director, Ministry Formation Catholic Health Association of the United States

Shirley Otis-Green, MSW, MA, ACSW, LCSW, OSW-CE, FNAP, FAOSW Founder, Collaborative Caring

David S. Wu, M.D., FAAHPM Palliative Care Physician Leader

AHA STAFF

Marie Cleary-Fishman, BSN, MS, MBA, CPHQ Vice President, Clinical Quality

Jane Jeffries

Director, Awards and Member Leadership Development

Debbie Pierce

Senior Director, Operations Field Engagement



The Circle of Life Award showcases palliative care and hospice organizations that are pioneering initiatives and approaches that make life better for the patients and communities they serve. This year's Circle of Life Award honorees are embedding their operations into distinct neighborhoods to tailor services to the needs of a specific community. They are working with pharmacy consultants to reduce patients' medications that are no longer appropriate. They are going the extra mile to help their patients have a bright moment during the day and sleep well at night. They are finding new ways to support patients with dementia and their caregivers, increasing the likelihood that patients can remain in their own homes as their disease progresses.

In their everyday interactions with patients and their caregivers, these inspiring organizations provide dignity and comfort at the special time that is the end of one's life. Simultaneously, they are creating ways to expand access to life-giving geriatric and palliative care services so that patients can feel as well as possible for as long as possible.

Please join in the Circle of Life Award celebration of compassionate and effective programs that:

- Partner with community organizations to meet the social needs of their patients.
- Use novel approaches to ensure that all communities have access to geriatric care.
- Develop close working relationships with payers to make their services widely available.
- Provide geriatric primary care and home-based services for elderly residents in specific neighborhoods.
- Include meaningful cultural elements in care planning.

More information about the Circle of Life Award, complete award criteria and previous recipients is available at www.aha.org/circleoflife.

2



Bristol Hospice — Hawaii

Honolulu, Hawaii

an a lavender-scented bedtime ritual for hospice patients improve quality of life? Just ask Tricia Pancner, regional vice president of operations and senior executive director at Bristol Hospice – Hawaii, about the value of Bristol's tender loving care programs.

"Individualized care plans pay for themselves because of the patient and caregiver satisfaction and the outcomes that we are looking for," she says. "We save money in the long run because they prevent avoidable hospitalizations and symptoms that can be hard to manage."

Bristol Hospice – Hawaii, based in Honolulu, provides hospice and palliative care in patients' homes, long-term care facilities and assisted-living communities.

Ronnie Rombawa, a dialysis patient who also has heart failure, has received supportive care services from Bristol twice in the past two years, and his wife Christine says they were truly lifesaving. After a hospital discharge, he was in so much pain that he could not tolerate the four-hour dialysis treatments he needed to stay alive.

"If it weren't for Bristol's help managing his pain and his nausea, which allowed him to continue with dialysis, he would have given up," Christine Rombawa says. "It really has saved my husband's life and allowed him to have more time with his children and his grandchildren."

Providing culturally sensitive care to its patients, who reflect Native Hawaiian, Asian, Pacific Islander, Western and multicultural traditions, is central to the Bristol Hospice – Hawaii's identity. "With bilingual and multicultural staff — including nurses, social workers, chaplains, and volunteers — we ensure that cultural understanding is not just a value, but a daily practice," Pancner says.

Chaplains and social workers work with patients and their

families to understand and integrate their values, beliefs and spiritual customs into the plan of care. Whenever appropriate, care plans include cultural elements such as ho'oponopono (a reconciliation ritual), respect for ohana (extended family involvement) and honoring ancestor worship or spiritual rituals from various Asian and Pacific Islander traditions.

Bristol Hospice — Hawaii focuses on making palliative care widely available through its relationships with insurers and provider organizations. The organization collaborates with Medicaid managed care organizations (MCOs) to improve care for their patients who have a serious disease by embedding a palliative care team, including physicians, nurses, social workers and chaplains, into the MCOs.

Because of these relationships, patients with Medicaid can access the medication and services, such as oxygen therapy, they need for symptom management. Counseling services are offered to patients and family members dealing with anxiety, depression and other psychological challenges related to the patient's serious illness. Social workers assist with patients' nonmedical needs such as stable housing, transportation to medical appointments and financial assistance.

INNOVATION HIGHLIGHTS

/ Contracts
co-developed with
insurers

/ Evening turndown service for hospice patients

/ Meaningful cultural elements in care plans

By increasing access to palliative care, the collaboration has resulted in fewer hospital admissions, Pancner says.

Similarly, Bristol Hospice — Hawaii has worked with private insurers to show how palliative care can improve disease management and reduce emergency department (ED) and hospital utilization. "We brought this issue to the forefront in conversations with private insurance providers, backed by clear data, real-world stories and a vision for a better way forward," Pancner says. "Data prove your value, but real patient experiences resonate deeply with decision-makers."

Insurers may not value palliative care because they do not fully understand what it is. Educating them is a key

"If it wasn't for Bristol's help managing my husband's pain and his nausea, which allowed him to continue with dialysis, he would have given up. It saved his life and allowed him to have more time with his children and his grandchildren."

Christine Rombawa, caregiver



Providing culturally sensitive care to its patients, who reflect Native Hawaiian, Asian, Pacific Islander, Western and multicultural traditions, is central to the Bristol Hospice — Hawaii's identity.

step in successful relationship-building. It's equally important to learn the language of value-based care. "Align your messaging with what matters to payers: improved quality scores, reduced costs and measurable impact on population health," she says.

With each payer, Pancner and her colleagues presented a structured program model, including the interdisciplinary team, care protocols, visit frequency and quality-monitoring process that they use. But each payer has its own workflows and reporting tools, which required Bristol Hospice — Hawaii to be flexible.

"Together, we co-developed contracts," Pancner says. Each contract defines patient eligibility and referral criteria, shared protocols for care coordination and communication, and outcome benchmarks.

Alex Mauricio, president and CEO of Bristol Hospice, appreciates the staff's dedication, compassion and commitment to improving the lives of patients and families. "We believe in providing the highest level of

support, and I couldn't be prouder of our Hawaii team for embodying that mission every day," he says.

That compassion is on display in the organization's Sweet Dreams program, in which certified nursing assistants (CNAs) provide an evening "turndown service" for hospice patients. Patients receive a kit that includes a hands-free speakerphone with a table lamp that can be set to create a calming environment and lavender spray, proven to reduce anxiety and ease restlessness. CNAs use a gentle ritual — perhaps hand and foot soaks or light massage — to help patients feel at peace.

"This is a nonpharmacological approach to support a healthy sleeping pattern and provide extra care and support to the family members and the caregivers as well," says Erin Hamilton, regional vice president.

Similarly, the Bright Moments program is designed to help patients with late-stage dementia reduce agitation. More than 40% of hospice patients in the U.S. have a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. Bristol Hospice — Hawaii uses evidence-based interventions to improve patients' mood and cognitive engagement and support their independence and dignity.

The Bright Moments program kit includes a music player and headphones — familiar songs can unlock memories and promote relaxation — as well as a weighted blanket, a "therapy bear" and other tools to help patients with dementia, who often experience anxiety and restlessness in the evening.

"The entire kit contains evidence-based, nonpharmacological tools to

help patients and families," Hamilton says.

The Bright Moments and Sweet Dreams programs are available to any palliative care or hospice patient who would benefit, regardless of their insurance coverage or financial status. In addition to improving patient and family satisfaction, the programs reduce the need for medication, after-hours crisis calls, and avoidable hospital transfers and ED visits.



PAST CIRCLE OF LIFE AWARD WINNERS

2023

- Center for Hospice Care, Mishawaka, Ind.
- Palliative Care Program, Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, Baltimore

2020

- Caring Circle of Spectrum Health Lakeland, St. Joseph, Mich.
- Choices and Champions, Novant Health, Winston-Salem, N.C.

2019

- UC Health Palliative Care—Anschutz Medical Campus, Aurora, Colo.
 - University Health System Palliative Care Team, San Antonio
- Hospice of the Western Reserve Navigator Palliative Care Services, Cleveland

2018

- Hospice of the Valley Palliative Home Care Program, Phoenix
- Penn Wissahickon Hospice and Caring Way, Penn Medicine, Bala Cynwyd, Pa.
- Western Connecticut Medical Group (now Nuvance Health Medical Practice), palliative care, Danbury, Conn.

2017

- Bluegrass Care Navigators, Lexington, Ky.
- Providence TrinityCare Hospice and TrinityKids Care, Providence Little Company of Mary Medical Center Torrance, and Providence Institute for Human Caring, Torrance, Calif.

2016

- Bon Secours Palliative Medicine, Richmond, Va.
- Cambia Palliative Care Center of Excellence at UW Medicine, Seattle
- Susquehanna Health Hospice and Palliative Care, Williamsport, Pa.

2015

• Care Dimensions, Danvers, Mass.

2014

- OACIS/Palliative Medicine, Lehigh Valley Health Network, Allentown, Pa.
 - Baylor Scott & White Supportive & Palliative Care, Dallas
 - Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, Yakima, Wash.

2013

- The Denver Hospice, Denver
- Lilian and Benjamin Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute, Mount Sinai Health System, New York City
 - UnityPoint Health, lowa and Illinois

For more information on previous winners, visit www.aha.org/circleoflife.



Gilchrist

Hunt Valley, Maryland

ilchrist, the largest provider of serious illness and end-oflife care in Maryland, knows that collaboration with other organizations is key to success. "Whether it's a state grant partner, a hospital partner or a payer partner, we first try to understand the needs of our patients and families, but also our fellow stakeholders in the pursuit of providing services," says Catherine Hamel, Gilchrist president. "We use the notion of 'power in partnership' in everything we do."

Established in 1994 as a hospice in Baltimore, Gilchrist has grown to provide a continuum of services, including geriatric primary care, dementia care, palliative care, hospice care and bereavement support.

Gilchrist works in a range of settings, providing many home-based services and maintaining three hospice care facilities. With more than 500 employees, Gilchrist serves more than 20,000 individuals each year, including members of patients' families and community members.

That includes Jim and Janet Jester of Baltimore County. In late 2024, their

son, suffering from a rare form of eye cancer, entered hospice care with Gilchrist and was able to be at home in the days before his death. A few months later, the couple turned to Gilchrist for home hospice care for Jim. "It was such a relief knowing we had a team we could trust. Gilchrist helped us through one of the hardest times in our lives, and now they are here for us again," Janet says. "I can call anytime, and someone is there to help. This journey is scary, and having someone to lean on makes all the difference."

Organized using the Neighborhood Concept of Care model, Gilchrist staff are organized into teams based in six locations, each of which serves a distinct city or county neighborhood. Each neighborhood site has varying partnerships and service offerings based on the needs of that neighborhood.

For example, in a neighborhood that is home to many

members of the Korean community, Gilchrist prioritizes home-based care, which aligns with the community's values. In the Baltimore City neighborhood, where food insecurity, lack of transportation and other social disparities are common, Gilchrist partners with food service providers, volunteer organizations that do home repairs and other non-health care entities to access support for its patients. "And the partners help us identify people who would benefit from primary care and geriatric care services for homebound older adults," Hamel says.

Each neighborhood site includes about 100 Gilchrist staffers. The small scale makes it easier for staff members to know each other and share a sense of mission and belonging. Patients and their families also benefit. "Since all staff operate out of the same physical office in the neighborhood and most are centered around our residential and general inpatient care units, our ability to quickly and effectively transition patients from one program to another is greatly simplified," she says.

In 2022, Gilchrist partnered with its parent organization, the Greater

the Pathways program, which provides primary care and home-based services for elderly residents of Baltimore City. "These are individuals who otherwise would not have had access to health care except through an emergency department (ED)," Hamel says.

The geriatric primary care team of physicians, nurse practitioners, nurse case managers and social workers is supported by pharmacy consultants who conduct medication reconciliation and, when appropriate, recommend elimination of medications that are duplicative or no longer needed. "Through our relationship with a pharmacy school, we have pharmacy students visit those elderly patients at home and de-prescribe," Hamel says.

The Pathways initiative reduced ED visits, hospital admissions and readmissions, saving nearly \$10.5 million in

Baltimore Medical Center, to seek and receive a state grant to launch



INNOVATION

HIGHLIGHTS

Services tailored to specific neighborhood

needs

/ Primary care and

home-based services

for underserved elderly

residents

Novel supports for patients with dementia

and their caregivers

Gilchrist staff are organized into teams based in six locations, each of which serves a distinct neighborhood. Each neighborhood site has varying partnerships and service offerings based on the needs of that neighborhood.

its first two years. That success led to another state grant that will fund the program for five more years.

Many of the patients served by the Pathways program will advance to Gilchrist's palliative and hospice programs over time. "They experience our care teams over an extended period, both improving their care experience and increasing their quality of life," Hamel says.

Gilchrist has partnered with Luminis Health, a two-hospital system in southern Maryland, to operate the Luminis Health Gilchrist Lifecare Institute, established to improve palliative and hospice care in that part of the state. Organized as a 50/50 joint venture partnership, with Gilchrist as managing partner, the institute provides inpatient palliative care, community-based palliative care and hospice care services.

Gilchrist racked up several notable achievements in 2024. It was chosen to participate in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Guiding an Improved Dementia Experience (GUIDE) Model pilot, which seeks to improve care for patients with dementia and their caregivers. Through this eight-year pilot program, Gilchrist eventually expects to serve as many as 1,200 patients daily.

The GUIDE pilot, which emphasizes caregiver education and support, gives Gilchrist the opportunity to connect with individuals early in their disease trajectory. "This allows us to provide support for the caregivers, which may enable these patients to age in place with familiar surroundings as their disease

continues to progress," says Leana Hoover, Gilchrist's chief operating officer.

Patients with dementia and their caregivers have needs that are different from patients who do not have dementia, and the typical progression of needs — geriatric care to palliative care to hospice care — does not always apply, says Mark Gloth, D.O., chief medical officer.

He and his Gilchrist colleagues already were exploring new ways to serve patients with dementia and their caregivers before CMS announced the GUIDE pilot, so they see it as an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of new care models. "It fits perfectly into the relearning we had already started on our own," Gloth says.

Another 2024 highlight: Gilchrist became the first organization in Maryland, and one of the first nationally, to receive hospice and palliative care certification from the American Heart Association in recognition of its adherence to the association's guidelines for end-of-life heart failure care. As a certified provider, Gilchrist is committed to evaluating its outcomes, refining its care practices and staff training, and sharing findings with the association to inform improved heart failure care nationwide.

Also last year, the Maryland Department of Health chose Gilchrist to be part of a coalition that is bringing the PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) to West Baltimore City. The PACE program works to meet the health and social needs of low-income older adults to support them in living in their own homes.





THANK YOU TO OUR WINNERS

In their everyday interactions with patients and their caregivers, these inspiring organizations provide dignity and comfort at the special time that is the end of one's life. Simultaneously, they are creating ways to expand access to life-giving geriatric and palliative care services so that patients can feel as well as possible for as long as possible.

10

SUPPORTING SPONSORS -





Advancing Health in America

CONTRIBUTING SPONSORS











CIRCLE of LIFE®

Celebrating Innovation in Palliative and End-of-Life Care