

## Local program educates minorities on hospice care

By Pohla Smith  
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A recent study found minority patients with heart failure were 20 percent less likely to use hospice care than whites.

The research out of the Indiana University School of Medicine would come as no surprise to the Rev. B. De Neice Welch, pastor of Bidwell United Presbyterian Church, North Side, and coordinator of Transitions.

Bidwell Presbyterian partnered with Family Hospice and Palliative Care and the Northside Christian Health Center in February 2011 to create Transitions for just that reason, in hopes of increasing understanding of, and access to, hospice care among African-Americans in the greater North Side community.



Rev. Welch

At the time, Family Hospice's database research showed that less than 5 percent of patients served annually were African-American. In fact, Rev. Welch said recently, Family Hospice's total number of African-American patients in its nine Western Pennsylvania-county service area between 2008 and 2010 was 13.

Why?

Many reasons, but three in particular, Rev. Welch said:

- A distrust of the medical field and doctors, going back to medical testing done on African-Americans many years ago. "If you don't believe they're going to take good care of you when you're living, you don't think they're going to take good care of you at the end," she said.

- Faith and religion. "People with faith believe God is going to heal everything ... so when you approach end-of-life discussions, it's a feeling of giving up."

- Language barriers. "If you're talking about palliation, it's not a known term. Pain management, it's not a normal thing," she said. "Med-

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ical terms, associated terms, are not broken down so that people understand.

"Those three are the biggest roadblocks that prevent us from seeking end-of-life care."

Since the formation of Transitions, the partners have been working through North Side churches and pastors, at seminars, health fairs, community gatherings, "anywhere we can talk to people face-to-face" to address those barriers, Rev. Welch said. "The African-American church is one of the strongest community-based institu-

tions. Without churches you can be guaranteed failure. ... We see it helping."

Slowly but surely, she said.

"We see it as a cultural change, which means it's going to take some time, which means it's not going to be an overnight thing. We've seen it statistically ... not just hospice care, but in education and awareness. We would definitely call it a success, just slow."

There are no statistics just for the North Side area covered by Transitions. But Family Hospice's nine-county service area had 27 African-American patients in 2011, the year Tran-

sitions was formed. "This year we're already up over 100," Rev. Welch said.

But Transitions' work is far from finished.

The North Side's African-American community still needs to learn that "hospice, fundamentally, is not a place, but a service, a ministry that can be ministered wherever the patient is," Rev. Welch said. The community also needs to learn that hospice isn't just for the patient but for the entire family, which can benefit from such things as caregiver programs and bereavement camps for children.

And, "the last, most important thing," she said, "hospice for most patients is covered by Medicare and Medicaid. It's not just for wealthy, white patients." Many insurance companies also cover hospice, and if a person is uninsured, is under age 65 and qualifies under the federal poverty guidelines, Family Hospice and Palliative Care will pay for services.

"We're going to keep active as long as we can so end-of-life care is as normative for the African-American population as it is for the white population," Rev. Welch said.

For more information about Transitions, call Rev. Welch at 412-651-2583; community liaison Maria Massucci at 412-651-2570, or Family Hospice at 1-800-513-2148.