

Thursday, February 24, 2011

Partnership aims to educate African-American community about hospice care

Ethan Cohen

Three Northside organizations are teaming up for an initiative to provide end-of-life care for the North Side's African-American community.

Through Transitions, a partnership with Bidwell Presbyterian Church and Northside Christian Health Center, Manchester-based Family Hospice and Palliative Care hopes to provide education and easy access to its services for Northside African-Americans with life-limiting illness or injury, said Family Hospice President and CEO Rafael Sciallo.

"Many people in the African-American community believe that hospice and palliative care are 'not for them.' A primary goal for the Transitions program is to educate the community in order to show that end-of-life care is for everyone," Sciallo said.

By providing care and to other hospice centers, the Transitions program will help members of the community understand end-of-life care and also cope with the difficulties families face with the death of a loved one.

According to The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, a non-profit that represents hospice and palliative care programs, these types of care are utilized by over 1.2 million patients and their families each year. Hospice care focuses on improving the quality of life for patients with short life expectancy while providing support for the patient's family, while palliative care is a more long-term approach.

Further research by NHPCO shows that the African-American community underutilizes these services, even when services are readily available in their neighborhoods.

End-of-life care may seem expensive, but it is normally covered by insurance companies, including Medicare and Medicaid, Sciallo said. Family Hospice also provides free end-of-life care for those without insurance.

The Transitions program is hoping to provide hospice and palliative care to about 20 people within the next year and about 70 people within the next two years, Sciallo said.

Reverend De Neice Welch, Bidwell United Presbyterian Church pastor and Transitions program coordinator, said that the initiative is based on a grass-roots community partnership. It aims to reach African-American community in order to make end-of-life care more easily accessible.

"On any given Sunday I have the opportunity to speak to at least 175 people at my church," Welch said. "I have the wonderful opportunity to use the pulpit as a tool to educate the congregation about the Transitions program. My congregation can then go out into the community and let other people know about the program."

Bidwell Presbyterian contributes to Transitions further by providing volunteers and spiritual mentoring for end-of-life patients and their families.

"Word of mouth is a powerful tool for us to let people know about Transitions," Welch said. "The partnerships that have been established through the program will ensure that the African-American community is educated on the benefits of hospice and palliative care and that those services can be accessed and provided with compassion and care."

Transitions received a two-year grant totaling \$62,326 from the Highmark Foundation. The Buhl Foundation, the McKinney Charitable Trust and other organizations have also provided funding.

Transitions will be housed at Family Hospice's Anderson Manor site at 1423 Liverpool St. and Bidwell United Presbyterian Church at 1020 Liverpool St.

To learn more about the Transitions program and the benefits of hospice and palliative care, call 412-651-2583.

Ethan G. Cohen was born and raised in Philadelphia. He is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in English Literature and Philosophy and currently interns with The Northside Chronicle.