

Hospice Care Helps Families & Also Saves Taxpayers \$\$\$

By Melissa Weidman

Wilma Carey's daughter Nell was concerned that her mom had been hospitalized for the fourth time in less than a year. At 77 years of age, her mother was experiencing symptoms of congestive heart failure and advancing dementia.

"Just keeping up with re-filling all her prescriptions, getting her to medical appointments and helping her deal with her own fear and loneliness sent us both over the edge," Nell confessed.

Many caring for a family member have similar experiences. Caregivers are prone to get sick themselves, stressed by financial pressures, caregiving responsibilities and the uncertainty of their loved one's condition.

And that's why the United States government created the Medicare hospice benefit in 1984, so families like the Careys could experience the best possible quality of life for both patients and family members.

"When Mom's primary care physician suggested hospice, I was so grateful. I knew they would come to her house and make her comfortable, but I didn't realize how much support they would provide for me too," Nell reported later.

Too many Americans don't realize that hospice also has produced significant savings for taxpayers. According to a report published in 2007 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai, hospice patients had significantly lower rates of hospital and intensive care use, hospital readmissions, and in-hospital death when compared to the matched non-hospice patients.

The study reveals that savings to Medicare are present for both cancer patients and non-cancer patients. Moreover, these savings appear to grow as the period of hospice enrollment lengthens. *The authors write, "... reductions in the use of hospital services at the end of life both contribute to these savings and potentially improve quality of care and quality of life."*

According to another national study, patients on hospice care live an average of 29 days longer than patients with similar diagnoses who don't receive hospice.

"This study reaffirms...why hospice is the best solution for caring for the dying in a way that provides patient-centered care and is cost effective for the Medicare system," says J. Donald Schumacher, president and CEO of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Despite all these benefits, it's estimated that only half the patients who would be eligible for these ser-



vices actually *receive* them.

As our country faces an upcoming national election, it's critical that legislators and citizens alike retain budget priority on proven policies like the Medicare hospice benefit. Our region's high proportion of seniors makes Cape Cod particularly vulnerable to any possible changes.

(Ms. Weidman is Director of Community Relations and Outreach for HopeHealth, 508-957-0200 or Mweidman@HopeHealthCo.org; HopeHealthCo.org for information on Hospice services.)