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Taking Hospice Inside the Walls

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Taking hospice inside the walls

Pamela Campbell, Tamara Sanden-Maurer and Melanie Schmid have three things in common.

They believe that no one deserves to die alone. They all want to be trained as hospice volunteers. And they are all inmates in the medium security unit at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.

Jan Selliken, associate professor of nursing at the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing, has something in common with each of them – her goal to establish a hospice program in the Oregon prison system.

“I could not believe that there were people dying in prison and there was no outside community support to assist with that,” said Selliken, who is a nurse educator, midwife, naturopathic physician and hospice nurse. “How can we think that anyone in prison is less deserving of hospice than someone on the outside?”

Hospice is common today, but up until 20 years ago there was little to help people prepare for dying.

“We had plenty to help people prepare for the birth process, but there was nothing to help people prepare for death,” she said. “As a society we deny death until it hits.”

Selliken already arranges clinical experiences for Linfield nursing students at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. She wants to go one step further. If she can secure grant funding, she plans to train inmates to serve as hospice volunteers in a program at Coffee Creek.

Tougher sentencing laws, mandatory minimum sentences and rules covering compassionate releases and paroles have resulted in an aging prison population, Selliken said. As a result, a growing number of inmates will die behind prison walls.

When Sanden-Maurer was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, she was not only terrified of dying alone, she was terrified of dying alone in prison.

“You are in your room, isolated and alone, with no one to help you through those last stages of life,” said Sanden-Maurer, who is now in remission.

The need for a hospice program became clear to Sanden-Maurer, Campbell and Schmid during the terminal illness and death of another inmate who made an indelible impact on each of them.

“Whether it’s in here or on the streets, dying is not an easy process,” Campbell said. “No one should have to die without people capable of supporting them. We need to help move people through the process in a way that is dignified and respectful.”

More people in prison have long-term, chronic or terminal illnesses, Schmid said. Hospice is not only



Jan Selliken, left, and Kim Kaplin '07, center, talk with, from left, Tamara Sanden-Maurer, Melanie Schmid and Pam Campbell, inmates at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. Selliken, associate professor of nursing, hopes to secure grant funding to train inmates to serve as hospice volunteers in the prison.

important to the patient, it’s a chance to allow inmates to do something good.

“It’s an opportunity for the provider to give something back, as well as provide something essential,” she added.

Involving students through clinicals and training can remove the stereotype of prison inmate.

“[The students] find out we have the same needs,” Campbell said. “We are mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts and grandmothers. All of that is really important for people to understand. We’ve made mistakes and we can’t go back and change things, but we can make changes from this point forward.”

Selliken has produced a 16-minute video that illustrates the need for a hospice program in the Oregon prison system. If she secures funding, she and Linfield nursing students will train inmates and medical personnel on end-of-life care. The inmates will have the rare opportunity to perform a service for another human being and give something back to society, Selliken said.

“Regardless of whether it’s in prison or on the outside, when you sit at the bedside of a dying person, you get a perspective of what’s really important,” she said.

— Mardi Mileham