



Embracing Our Dying

A Project of the California Catholic Conference

Hospice and the Catholic Parish

Forming a Collaborative Relationship and Improving Support of Parishioners

Catholic parishes can often be the “neighborhood”—even if not near home—filled with familiar faces. The parish is where Catholics gather to pray and grow as a faith community. When one among the parish members is seriously ill, prayer is offered for him or her and yet much more may be needed.

Following is information on how a parish can best access and utilize the services and resources of hospice to enable the better care for parishioners living with a life threatening illness and to support their caregivers.

Getting the Most from the Hospice Experience

Working together for the common good of the patient/ parishioner is possible when the family, parish and hospice work together.

- It is recommended that the patient and/or family [be familiar with what hospice is and is not](#). The choice of hospice care—and which hospice care—should be an informed decision based on the needs of the patient and family. It is also recommended that a designated interested person (perhaps even a close friend who is also a fellow parishioner) call and ask questions of the local hospice programs, and that before placement, an [interview be conducted](#).
- Any one can recommend hospice to a family. More can be done for patients—and their families—when the admission to the program is earlier rather than at the “brink of death.” Although a physician must at some point give an order that the patient is eligible based on the prognosis and goals of care, it is perfectly acceptable to have the “idea” of hospice introduced by a trusted clergy or lay person.
- Because working together with and for the patient and family ensure that all needs will be met, hospice teams welcome visits by the parish clergy or staff or parish volunteers. Such visits can help the hospice chaplain and/or staff to understand and support the faith based approach to the patient’s end of life experience.
- If permitted by the family, following a visit, parish visitors can “update” the patient’s hospice team or ask for additional help. Hospice team members welcome the perspectives of all who are caring for the patient.
- Family meetings in the home, hospital or a skilled nursing facility can be well served by having a faith-filled person known by the patient and/or family in attendance who can help with complex or emotionally charged situations.
- Some patients and/or families benefit from meeting prior to time of the patient’s death to plan the funeral services. This planning meeting can be a collaboration among family members, hospice team, hospice chaplain, parish representative—and in some cases—the patient himself or herself.

Helping the seriously ill or dying parishioner

Helping them get the assistance they really need ...and want!

When a family or individual is struggling with a serious life threatening condition, it is comforting for them to know that they are not forgotten. Some patients may be isolated—lacking a strong connection to parish life—yet are particularly in need of the parish embrace at this time in their journey.

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Following are a list of some **practical ways** to help the dying person and/or the impacted loved ones.

- Organizing food and meals for the patient, if appropriate—taking into consideration dietary restrictions
- Providing packaged meals—sack lunches for children, snacks and portable meals for family members who are too busy to “eat”
- Driving the children in the family to school, activities, or sports so life stays as “normal” as possible
- Performing yard work—a good way for young people to offer service
- Performing household chores such as laundry and cleaning.
- Running errands as needed—or on a regular basis—including shopping for food or supplies, picking up medications
- Driving the patient to and from medical appointments
- Arranging for a home hair cut or shampoo—appearance can be very important for both men and women who are home bound or in a facility
- Making preparations a simple celebration for holidays and birthdays—those days come even when families are burdened and preoccupied.
- Relieving caregivers for a specified time so that they can rest, take care of personal needs, and prepare themselves for what is ahead
- Offering to be the “switchboard” for updating neighbors, friends, and parish staff of the patient’s status and needs
- Checking in by phone on a regular basis—leaving a message if necessary—to tell the patient and family that they are being held in thought and prayer.
- Sending cards and small thoughtful tokens of care and concern

Tips for visiting

- ▶ Call first to find out what is a good time for visiting.
- ▶ Bring something – card, flowers, pictures, food.
- ▶ While there, observe needs and ask if you can help.
- ▶ Keep hope alive by talking about ordinary things
- ▶ Show concern about the serious issues
- ▶ Preserve the experience of faith “community” by praying with the patient/and or family

Supporting children who have a dying loved one

It is important to help children in family do “normal,” age-appropriate activities during this time

Following are a list of some **practical ways** to help the children in the family

- Offering to drive the children—or carpool with the children’s friends—to school, to the mall, to a part time job, to clubs, and to team activities
- Offering to attend events or activities with the children
- Encouraging legacy activities such as videos, photo journaling, writing letters to loved ones for the future
- Providing daycare help for young families with a sick child or sick parent—older children can offer to play with younger children, help them with homework, or provide company while adults are tending to the sick person.
- Offering children the opportunity to call or to visit the sick person before he or she dies. because children often express regrets—even anger—when they are not given that choice
- Explaining to children about what they will see, hear, smell, sounds before they visit the dying person and allow them to leave after a few minutes if they are overwhelmed and need “a breather.”

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Providing grief support for children who have had a loved one die

Special milestones occur and their parent is no longer here...

- Suggesting ways that family can include the input and/ or participation of children in the family for the funeral services
- Remembering the children in the eulogy planning that recognizes their place in the life of the person who died.
- Talking to the children about their parent who they have lost, who they loved and who lives on through their memories and stories of told by others
- Including the children in family activities with friends—as often after the loss of the parent they do not have the same family structure as before
- “Adopting” the child for a day activities—especially making notes of the milestones they now reach without their loved one
- Asking local grief groups at local hospices for assistance even if the person who died did not receive hospice care

The possibilities of collaboration among school, parish and hospice

Forums, in-service trainings, bereavement programs...

- Offering educational forums—perhaps on “All Souls Day”—for parents informing them about what is available for their own children when grief is in the home and for their aging parents who will need hospice support some day
- Providing age appropriate information for adults to share with children in preparation for the impending death of a loved one and for a funeral
- Establishing contact with a local hospice and their bereavement program so that if there is a sudden death that impacts a classroom and a school, there is someone to call on to speak to the class and/or to provide resources to the faculty
- Providing an in-service training for parish staff, ministers of consolation, and Eucharistic ministers to the sick and homebound—using the resources of the hospice bereavement program

The Parish can also be a rich resource for the hospice!

Many hospice workers do not know the unique views, beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church.

- Most hospice programs welcome the opportunity for someone from a parish to provide an in-service for hospice staff so that they can better understand, respect and support the foundations of Catholic faith observances at the major life milestones of illness, death and grief
- The parish can offer a forum for hospice to educate the parish on a variety of topics and a resource for forming parish bereavement support groups and collaboration with parish consolation ministry

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