

Hospice thrives on director's handiwork

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Linda Downey is stepping down as Executive Director of Willamette Valley Hospice in January.

Linda Downey is a quilter, and examples of her handiwork decorate the walls of conference rooms at Willamette Valley Hospice.

Each is crafted with reverence and stitched with devotion, each square embellished with the names of patients.

The memorial quilts represent the comfort and support Willamette Valley Hospice provides during palliative and end-of-life care.

Downey has demonstrated the same reverence and devotion in her work as executive director of the nonprofit organization.

She stitched together the financial pieces when she took the job in 1998, and has spent the past 11 years crafting a patchwork of social, physical and spiritual services for dying patients and their families throughout Marion and Polk counties.

"She has pulled it up by its bootstraps and brought it be a very successful organization," board member Cretia Benolken said. "She's an incredible manager and beloved by everybody.

"She's going to be a tough act to follow."

Downey is retiring. The next couple months she will be working alongside her replacement, Pamela Matthews, to ease the transition.

Benolken and the other board members are sad to see Downey go. Many of them were on the board when she was hired.

"Everyone said if we could get her, we would be extremely fortunate," Walter Jones said. "She came so highly recommended by everyone in the field."

Downey came to Willamette Valley Hospice with a background in nursing and hospice care. She had worked as a nurse and/or administrator at Salem Hospital, Good Samaritan and Legacy Emanuel.

Nursing was an easy choice for her, after also considering careers as a secretary or teacher.

"I was lousy at typing, so I knew secretary was out," she said, "and I wasn't all that good with kids."

Nursing eventually led her to hospice. She started as a volunteer.

Throughout her career she earned the reputation of being a troubleshooter, a reputation that had to be appealing to the Willamette Valley Hospice board.

She remembers receiving a call from the board president just two weeks after accepting the job, and the news wasn't good. The organization's financial condition was misrepresented, unintentionally, during the hiring process. There was "financial distress," as it was described to her.

Downey only briefly second-guessed her decision, and then set out to fix the problem.

She had taken on a similar challenge before, inheriting an in-patient hospice facility that she ultimately had to close until she could find a merger partner to provide financial backing.

It never got to that point at Willamette Valley Hospice, but times were tough. The first six months, Downey had to reserve money to make payroll, which meant some bills went unpaid for awhile. Local pharmacies and hospitals were patient.

"I think if people hadn't been gracious, we could have been very close to closing," she said.

Willamette Valley Hospice had a staff of about 30 when Downey came aboard. Today she manages 108 employees, including 35 registered nurses. The staff serves about 170 patients a day.

The biggest change during Downey's tenure has been the growth of hospice care in the Salem area, which now has four for-profit hospices.

"We have competition now," Downey said. "That's real."

Downey has been the catalyst behind offering expanded hospice services like music therapy, massage therapy, pet therapy, bereavement support and Spanish-language resources.

"We've very judiciously added a service every time we think what might benefit patients," she said.

Willamette Valley Hospice offers compassionate care and support to terminally ill people and their families. It can take place at the patient's home, in an assisted living facility, or at a nursing home.

A patient must have a doctor's referral to begin services, which are covered by Medicare and many insurance plans. With the support of community funds and donations, Willamette Valley Hospice accepts and serves all patients regardless of ability to pay.

Downey's biggest concern for the future of the organization is the Medicare reimbursement structure, which faces inevitable changes.

"We're going to be hard pressed to be able to continue the kinds of services we're doing now," she said. "We're going to need to be more active fundraising."

Downey leaves the organization with no debt. The building in West Salem, where Willamette Valley Hospice has its headquarters, is paid off.

She looks forward to orientating Matthews, whose first day is Nov. 2, and you can bet Downey won't stop planning for the organization's future.

"I suspect I'll be doing that until the day I walk out," she said.

Her last day is Jan. 4.

Downey will dearly miss the people she works with. She considers her staff her patients.

"She's a very easy-going leader and has a great open-door policy for us," community development manager Linda Hays said. "She has been a great mentor for me."

One thing Downey won't miss is the commute from Portland, 45 miles each way. She has gone through three cars during her tenure. She and her husband settled in Portland because he was working in Hillsboro at the time and she in Salem.

"Probably the majority of the staff don't even know I live in Portland," she said. "I'm here first and leave last most of the time. I've tried to be a part of things in the community, like Rotary and United Way."

Downey turns 62 later this month, and figures it's finally time for her to join her husband in retirement.

"I've put him off and put him off," she said.

In preparation, she has been doing some reading about what to expect in retirement, and how to plan for it.

She started a list of things she wants to do, and has always dreamed of doing. She was at No. 49 when we sat down for an interview, and the list continues to grow.

She wants to volunteer, including in a hospice setting. That could be tricky, because she has a lot of friends who work for various organizations and businesses.

"I'm trying to figure out what to do and not hurt anyone," she said.

A former colleague, who already is retired, wants her to help teach quilting at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

Downey looks forward to doing some traveling and spending quality time with her and her husband's elderly parents. The list even includes mundane things like finally cleaning the garage. On her calendar also is a big quilting event in 2011 in Kentucky.

"If I haven't learned anything working in hospice, it's quality of life more than the quantity of years," she said. "Do what you want to do and dream about before it's too late."

"Forward This" appears Wednesdays and Sundays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. To share a story, contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6710.