

Eli's Hospice Insider

MARKETING: Tell Your Hospice Stories to Showcase Your Quality of Care

Culture shift can pave the way to referral boon.

Studies show, time and again, that the general population is confused about hospice care. Taking the initiative to tell the stories of your patients, staff, and volunteers can help increase public awareness, employee morale, and referrals.

Lay Groundwork to Gather Stories

"Death," "dying," "darkness," and "scary." Those were some of the associations people expressed about hospice when Hospice at Home in St. Joseph, Mich. conducted market research in 2007. "People didn't have an understanding of what hospice was," says **Melinda Graham**, director of development for Hospice at Home. So Hospice at Home made the decision to start sharing their stories about the hospice experience with the community. But first, they needed to become more comfortable with sharing stories themselves. Before launching their Life is Precious initiative, staff was more likely to quietly whisper their hospice stories in the halls. "Our biggest barrier was ourselves. We felt like sharing stories took away from what we were doing," Graham says

Try this: An internal campaign that encouraged clinicians and others to share these stories, and reassure them that families were proud and also wanted to get their experiences out there was the first step in gathering stories for the campaign.

Now, hospice stories serve as a pivot point for Hospice at Home communication. Rather than dry brochures, true stories drive home the value of hospice care when sales representatives do outreach. And audio stories start out all friends of hospice, volunteer, and board meetings as well. Hospice at Home has even hired a marketing employee as "Life is Precious coordinator" whose chief responsibility is gathering and writing up stories from families and staff.

Enlist Resources to Get the Word Out

Like Hospice at Home, Detroit-based Hospice of Michigan took a three-pronged approach in its external stories campaign. Once a week, during evening drive time, a new episode of "Stories at Sunset" airs on local news radio.

You can also listen to the stories by Web site (www.hom.org). In addition, Hospice of Michigan sends board members a weekly email with a link to the latest story, in hopes that the email will be forwarded to family, friends, and colleagues. While Hospice of Michigan enlists its communication director in gathering and writing up stories from families, clinicians, volunteers, and donors, much of the audio story production staff is volunteer-based.

Volunteers read the stories, and radio stations have donated time. One board member, who had retired from a career in advertising, provided pivotal expertise in launching the campaign, says **Marcie Hillary**, vice president for resource development at Hospice of Michigan.

Bonus: Discovering the wealth of experience board member retirees have to share with the agency was an added benefit to developing this campaign, Hillary says.

Stories Could Double Your Referrals

Hospice of Michigan has three goals they hope to achieve with their recently-launched campaign, Hillary says:

1. To reach the 67 percent of people who are eligible for hospice care but aren't using the service.

2. To let people know that they don't have to wait for their physician to talk to them about hospice -- they can initiate the conversation.

3. To increase fund raising. Hospice at Home has already experienced some great outcomes as a result of their campaign. Aside from the culture shift that has given new energy to story sharing internally, the campaign has proved a great success with community referrals.

Referrals from family members have more than doubled since the Life is Precious campaign began two years ago. "Family members were our largest referral source in 2009. That was not the case a couple of years ago," says Graham.