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Hospice Austin Launches New Program to Get Communities Talking about End of Life Issues

Not so long ago, nearly all children were born in a hospital, with the mother under sedation and the father in the waiting room. Now, new parents carefully plan for the birth of a child, from childbirth classes to dedicated birthing centers, to home births, to doulas.

Hospice Austin wants to help people put the same kind of thought toward the end of life as they do toward the beginning. They are launching a new program this month, “On Our Own Terms,” which will train volunteers to go back to their communities and talk about such end of life issues as filling out forms to make their final wishes known, medical power of attorney, pros and cons of life support, and palliative care and pain management.

“People really need to know what their options are before they’re faced with a crisis so they can make the best decisions for themselves,” said David Zuniga, the program’s outreach coordinator. “We want to give people the confidence and tools to face the end of life on their own terms.”

The free 12-hour volunteer training will be held at the Hospice Austin office at 4107 Spicewood Springs Road on Feb. 3 and Feb. 5th from 6-9 pm and Saturday, Feb. 7th from 9 – 3 pm. Volunteers are then asked to share their new knowledge with some sort of group—their congregation, friends, civic club, neighborhood association, it doesn’t really matter, as long as people get people talking.

All too often, people’s wishes are not being honored. According to research from Gallup and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 70% of the population say they would prefer to die at home, yet less than 25% actually do so. Unfortunately, medical and cultural attitudes towards illness and dying still represent tremendous barriers to open, honest discussion and timely access to palliative and end-of-life care—care that can profoundly and positively impact the course of their disease as well as the quality of life, not just for the patients, but for their loved ones and caregivers as well.

“We’re trying to start lots of conversations about end of life care—and hopefully that will work to improve the quality at the end of life,” said Zuniga. “People are taking back

control of how their children are born, and they're starting to take back end-of-life health care in the same way. And that's a great thing."

On Our Own Terms, made possible through a grant from the Shivers Cancer Foundation, will serve Travis, Williamson, Bastrop, Hays and Caldwell counties. For more information, please contact David Zuniga at 342-4700 or dzuniga@hospiceaustin.org.

Hospice Austin is one of the oldest and largest hospices in Texas and the only non-profit hospice in Austin. For more than 25 years, Hospice Austin has provided end-of-life care that emphasizes compassion, independence, respect and dignity. As a non-profit, Hospice Austin provides care to all, regardless of a patient's ability to pay.