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LOCAL COALITION FORMED TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT HOSPICE

(CHICO, Calif.) – A large, local coalition called “Friends of Hospice” has mailed over 2,000 letters to individuals and families who have been touched by hospice care in Butte, Glenn, and Tehama counties. The letter campaign is the cornerstone of a new program to increase awareness and understanding of hospice.

Recognizing that only about a third of those who are eligible for hospice care actually receive it, eight local community health organizations have come together with the California Hospice Foundation to pilot a new person-to-person communications campaign. Those who receive the letters are being asked to spread the word about hospice to their network of friends and loved ones via e-mail or postcard.

“Hospice is a difficult subject to raise for all parties concerned – the person facing an illness, the family, and the physician. It’s important for everyone to know that hospice

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isn't giving up – it *is* care. Hospice offers people a way to preserve their dignity and receive the care and support of family, friends and, most importantly, a caring team of health professionals,” said Dr. Tanya Layne, chairperson of the Butte-Glenn Medical Society.

Hospice is a form of health care provided to people who are confronting a serious illness when cure is no longer a reasonable goal. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 70 percent of Americans would prefer to die at home rather than in an institution, but only a quarter of the population does so. In California, more than half of those who receive hospice care are in a program for a short period – just 16 1/2 days in 2004, the most recent year for which statewide data is available.

Although median lengths of stay in hospice programs have been rising nationally, reaching 21.7 days in 2004, they remain short in California and in the local area, according to state and national data compiled by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Association and local data provided by three local hospice programs. The median length of stay for each of the three participating hospice organizations was just 18 days in 2005.

The coalition sponsoring the Friends of Hospice pilot program includes: American Cancer Society; Butte Home Health and Hospice; Butte-Glenn Medical Society; California State University, Chico, School of Nursing; Chico Area Interfaith Council; Enloe Medical Center Hospice; Paradise Hospice, a department of Feather River

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Hospital; and Passages Adult Resource Center.

“Word-of-mouth information is very important when people are facing a serious illness. Traditional communication programs have failed to create sufficient awareness and understanding of hospice as an option at the end of life,” notes Margaret Clausen, president and CEO of the California Hospice Foundation. “As far as we know, this is the first time that people who have been touched by hospice – volunteers, donors and family members – have been invited to spread the word in their community in this way.”

By sending postcards or emails to friends, those who choose to participate in Friends of Hospice will offer to share their hospice experience, should their friends ever want to know more. They will also encourage people to talk to their families about their wishes in the event of a serious illness.

In addition to the letter, Friends of Hospice will offer free informational materials about advance care planning and hospice on its website (www.hospicefoundation.info) and through a toll-free number (1-877-248-1122). It will also present three community meetings beginning on May 31 for those who want to learn more.

If successful, Friends of Hospice will be implemented in other California communities. Friends of Hospice is funded by private donations under the auspices of California Hospice Foundation, 501(c)(3) charitable foundation dedicated to improving access to quality hospice and palliative care services through education and public awareness.

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