A Dignified Death for All

In at least some sense, societies, nations, and communities are measured by how they treat their most disadvantaged, and this is particularly true for those individuals who have reached the end of their lives. A dignified death for all might seem like a hopelessly unrealistic goal, perhaps only worthy of a little consideration during our most idealistic daydreams. But, we are writing this letter to the citizens of Dane and surrounding counties to say this improbable goal is attainable, and to say all citizens in these counties can contribute to making this ideal a reality. Let us outline how we can make this claim.

The Agrace Mission

Most of you are familiar with Agrace, the non-profit organization that provides palliative and end-of-life care to approximately 650 individuals a day from all walks of life in Dane, Rock, Sauk, Green, Iowa, Columbia, Dodge, Jefferson and Walworth counties. Most patients receive care in their own homes, or in residential facilities, such as nursing homes, assisted living communities and the Ellen & Peter Johnson HospiceCare Residence in Madison. In addition, support often includes grief and spiritual counseling for families, which greatly benefits children and other loved ones.

Most Agrace patients get financial assistance for these critical services from government (e.g. Medicare and Medicaid) or private insurance, but tragically, some do not. These people can be ineligible for government resources for a variety of reasons, such as age (i.e. they might be too young) or delays in government approval (e.g. some die while their paperwork is still in process). Consequently, these individuals cannot pay for part or all of the services they need and deserve, and can undergo physical pain, emotional or spiritual distress, and substandard, or even a lack of housing during their last days. Until now, Agrace has provided for these patients under its Care for All program.

Over the last 5 years, Agrace’s Care for All program has given hospice and palliative care to hundreds of individuals in our community. Costs for this support have totaled more than $1 million, and payment has been generated through donations to Agrace specifically targeted to this patient population. Based on our own projections and increased awareness of Care for All in the community, we expect this program to incur annual expenses of about $750,000 per year going forward. That is why we are making this effort to raise awareness of Care for All now, and have created a Care for All endowment program. But, first, let us provide some examples as to how Care for All affects people in our community.

Patients Who Slip Through the Cracks

Most of us are fortunate, accustomed to seeing loved ones experience death in a supportive environment with appropriate medical care, food, shelter, and family comfort. However, the vagaries of life cause some in our community to find themselves in an entirely different position – and here is where Care for All steps in.
The daughter of a rural Wisconsin couple who operated a small farm was diagnosed with a terminal illness when she was 14. The family did everything possible to help their daughter and alleviate her pain, exhausting their resources in the process. Under the Care for All program, Agrace was able to move their daughter into the Ellen and Peter Johnson HospiceCare Residence, where she passed away under expert medical care and surrounded by family.

A young couple with two small children were leading a modest life and establishing themselves in the community when the husband discovered he had brain cancer. The progression of the disease left them emotionally exhausted and financially drained, so that even obtaining food was difficult. Because of his age, the husband was not eligible for Medicare’s hospice benefit, and their insurance policy’s hospice coverage was inadequate. Here, Care for All enabled him to spend his last 15 days at home with his wife and kids and eliminated the additional financial burden that care would have put on the future of his family.

A Vietnam veteran had difficulty adjusting to life’s stresses and regularly used homeless resources in our community for 15 years. He had no resources or family, but obviously his needs were as great as anyone facing their last days. While arranging for his transfer to a VA home in Milwaukee, Agrace partnered with Porchlight and Adult Protective Services to provide temporary housing and hospice services. Here, Care for All ensured this veteran’s last days in our community were lived with dignity.

Why a Care for All Endowment

Until now, individual donations directed to the Care for All program have been used to help pay for these patients, and Agrace has provided additional funds when necessary. As indicated, this need in our community will grow, and, if we continued to operate in the same manner, Agrace would have to raise an increasing amount of money each year for this program. Instead, Agrace has decided to create a Care for All endowment of $15,000,000, which will generate the approximate $750,000 per year necessary to sustain the program into the future. We expect to complete this endowment by 2019. In order to show Agrace’s commitment to Care for All and set a foundation for the endowment, Agrace will contribute $2,000,000 to the effort.

Creating an endowment has several advantages for individual donors and Agrace, but most importantly, for the patients. First, individual donors will know that their contributions will not serve a one-time need, but be utilized again and again for the specific benefit of Care for All patients. Secondly, donors can feel confident that Agrace is fully capable of efficiently managing and maximizing their contributions in perpetuity, as evidenced by its proven, successful, 37-year history of serving the terminally ill population in our community. From Agrace’s perspective, having a Care For All endowment enables it to concentrate its efforts on what it does best, providing compassionate, quality end-of-life and palliative care to our community. Finally, this endowment will enable Agrace to meet the promise that the Care For All program makes to our community – a dignified death for all.
A Dignified Death for All Is Possible

In conclusion, the Care for All endowment campaign addresses an issue that spans all religious, political, economic, and societal boundaries, and raises a fundamental question about our community and perhaps ourselves - how do we treat the most disadvantaged among us when they are dying? Care for All committee members believe our community can indeed treat these people well, and are willing to extend our utmost efforts to ensure Agrace can continue to provide this fundamental right – a dignified death – to all in our community. If you agree, please join with us in creating a Care for All endowment that will make this ideal a reality for decades to come.

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