



My Hospice: Vigil Volunteers

*What **My Hospice** means is different to each individual and family we serve. For vigil volunteers, it means being present for those who are imminently dying. As Medicare's first coordinated care model, we must protect the Medicare Hospice Benefit and fulfill a hospice promise that no one has to die alone.*

Volunteers are a vital part of hospice care. Their presence is mandated by law and is in keeping with the mission to build a community of care at the end-of-life. Volunteers style hair, walk dogs, listen to stories, play music from a favorite era, knit with patients and help them create artwork.

Volunteers can also choose to be part of bedside vigils, an especially important and intense endeavor that requires additional training on the physical, psychosocial and spiritual aspects of a person actively dying.

Alison Reynoso, who coordinates the vigil volunteers at **Visiting Nurse Service of New York Hospice and Palliative Care** shares more information and tips for being a vigil volunteer:

The only requirement of a vigil volunteer is that they are fully present, listening, witnessing, being. For others, some sing, others are silent. Some read poetry or, if appropriate, scripture. Some close their eyes. Many hold hands.

It is nothing more, and nothing less, than sending love and peace to the person you're with. You don't even have to speak it. You can communicate it in your thoughts. It is about offering a compassionate presence without expectations about what is supposed to happen.

Vigil volunteering is a profound and intimate experience because it's an honor to be in a person's presence as they take their last breath.

When physicians or other caregivers have determined that death is imminent—typically within 24 to 48 hours, vigil volunteers are called to bedside and typically work 2-3 hour shifts to offer as many hours of support as possible to reduce the chance of a person dying alone. While volunteers are provided some information, it doesn't necessarily describe what they're going to find. It's so important to be in the moment and just go with whatever happens.

Volunteers sit with a patient who has no family or long-distance family, or sometimes volunteers support family members have to step away briefly or need support themselves.

One volunteer supported a husband so he wouldn't have to be alone as his wife of 50 years lay dying. He was open and honest and spoke about how they met, how they belonged to each other, what she was like. They had no children, and this husband was extremely grateful for an opportunity to tell how he felt about his wife.

Tips for Vigil Volunteers

1. **Be prepared.** It is important for someone keeping vigil to be comfortable with death, which is why volunteers spend much of their training reflecting on their own death and their experiences with and thoughts about death and dying. Keep a journal of your experiences or find another vigil trained volunteer “buddy.”
2. **Get centered and remain present** before you enter the room and focus on your intention, which is just to be present. It’s so important to be comfortable with just sitting and being a presence for those who are dying. Start by introducing yourself and then tell the person what you are doing. For example, “I am going to sit at your side... I am going to place my hand under your hand, and you are welcome to move it if you do not wish to be touched.”
3. **Take care of yourself too.** Have a snack and bring a sweater. Volunteers are encouraged to arrive at a vigil well-fed and comfortable to prevent being distracted from the moment by hunger, heat or cold.
4. **Know what to expect.** A crucial part of volunteer training is teaching volunteers about ‘nearing death awareness,’ a set of behaviors that are common among those who are near death but can be misinterpreted as confusion or disorientation. In short, remain open, supportive and without having the need to do or fix anything. It truly depends on how close the person is to death, which can be in hours or days.
5. **Express yourself and reflect** on the experience when it’s over. Death is so momentous and out of the ordinary that it’s often hard to integrate back into your day. Talking can help, whether to a loved one, another volunteer, or a healthcare professional who understands.

As for me, I will never forget my own experience of being present during a vigil. It is one of the most profound things I’ve ever done. It became an exchange of energy between the person and myself as I held her hand. I will never forget how peaceful she became.