

# TO YOUR HEALTH

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## Reflections on 15 years of Palliative Care at Carleton Willard

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This year marks the 15th year of the innovative *Living Fully, Dying Well* palliative care program at Carleton Willard. This unique program may be the only one of its kind in a retirement community. Since its' official launch in 2009, hundreds of Residents and their families have benefitted from the services provided to those with serious illness.

### History

In 2008, over the span of a year, an interdisciplinary team met to develop an innovative, robust palliative care program to care for Residents nearing the end of their lives at Carleton Willard. The team consisted of Department Directors for several disciplines as well as 2 Chaplains. They discussed holistic elements that would be of support to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of people whose illnesses had reached a point where they were no longer responding to traditional medical treatments. The team understood that dying is not solely a medical event, but there are other aspects of our common humanity that can still experience healing, even as one's body is nearing the end. In an effort to treat the whole person, the team developed an outline of services the program would offer which included Complementary Therapies like Massage Therapy, Reiki, Music, Pet Therapy, Spiritual Support, a team of trained Vigil Volunteers and a strong partnership with hospice. The culmination of the team's work was the launch of the *Living Fully, Dying Well* program in January 2009.



## Vigil Volunteers

At the core of the program is the goal that no one should have to die alone, unless that's their wish. In an effort to accompany the dying, the Vigil Volunteer program was developed. The volunteers went through an extensive training program in the fall of 2008 and in January 2009 they began sitting at the bedside with Residents whose lives were coming to a close. They offered their presence, held a hand, filled in for exhausted family members, read to the Resident, chatted with loved ones and sat in silence. Some reported that they learned a lot and were more prepared and knowledgeable about losses in their own families. Between vigils the group of volunteers met in a support group to process some of their experiences. What we didn't foresee at the beginning was how close this group of Vigil Volunteers would become over time.

### Awards

In May 2019, the Vigil Volunteers won the national **LeadingAge Catalyst Award** and last year they won the **2023 Volunteer of the Year Award** from LeadingAge Massachusetts. Some have been volunteering in the program since its' inception 15 years ago. Their service is at the core of our mission. Judging by their longevity, it's apparent that they find it meaningful to volunteer in this unique way.



### Complementary Therapies

Last year, the granddaughter of one of our Residents (who had gone through the continuum of care and passed in the health  
*continued*

center), wanted to give back to Carleton Willard. Before going off to her first year of college, this young woman brought in her sweet Golden Retriever, Sandy, to visit people in the health center. Sandy brought many smiles and joy to Residents and staff alike. This is just one example of the impact that good care can have on families who entrust us with the care of their loved ones. Music and Massage continue to be offered and both can brighten the days of those experiencing serious illness and loneliness. Hearing a beloved song can bring us all back to the time in our past when it was part of the day to day of our lives. And having a gentle massage to ease our stiff joints can bring immense relief and comfort.

### Partnership with Hospice

Since the beginning of the *Living Fully, Dying Well* program, we have cultivated a strong relationship with Care Dimensions hospice. Our teams meet regularly to discuss what is needed for each person receiving this specialized care. They offer their expertise in pain and symptom management at the end of life. Early on, we asked for the same team members from our hospice team, and we have developed a good rapport with our team over time. Carleton-Willard Village recently brought on another hospice provider, Compassus, so people would have a choice of different hospice providers.

### Quality of Care

Grieving the loss of a loved one is never an easy or clear path. Every journey through grief takes its own time and is unique. When the one we love can be given excellent care, when their symptoms are managed and they are kept comfortable in their last days, it can be helpful in the healing process of their loved ones. Through the *Living Fully, Dying Well* program, we strive to address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the person nearing the end of their life and also support their families along the way. Over and over we have seen that the quality of care leading up to the death can have a positive impact on the families in their journey through grief. *continued*

### Looking ahead

We have learned from each situation and refined the services we offer to tailor them to the needs of the Residents in our care. We feel that this program could be a model for other facilities like ours that wish to offer excellent end-of-life care as people age in communities. It takes a commitment from the board and leadership to see the value in maintaining a palliative care program. In the bigger picture, this level of care brings families back to Carleton Willard; generation after generation.



### Grief Support

As we age, it is natural to need to grieve the losses we all experience. Carleton Willard offers grief support through the **"Time to Heal"** group. It can help to find comfort in a group of people who may be going through similar losses. If you are interested in joining, please contact Maeve in the clinic.

### Prepare for Changing the Clocks

Daylight saving time begins on **Sunday, March 10, at 2 a.m.**, when we move our clocks an hour ahead, or "spring forward." Even though we are only losing one hour of sleep, statistics show that auto accidents increase following the time change. Sleep deprivation can slow our reaction time and judgement. One way to prepare for the time change is to go to bed earlier a few days before changing the clocks to adjust our inner biological clocks gradually.

