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Good Shepherd Hospice honored for Hispanic volunteer program

LAKELAND, FLA. – Florida Hospices and Palliative Care (FHPC) has recognized Good Shepherd Hospice for its Bilingual Church Volunteer Team with an Award of Excellence in Innovation for Community Outreach. Good Shepherd Hospice received the award at Florida Hospice's 2010 annual Forum on May 20 in Orlando.

"In 2006, fewer than five percent of Hispanic patients nationwide accessed hospice care when doctors diagnosed them with a terminal disease," said Chris Bredbenner, Good Shepherd Hospice executive director. "That year, Hispanic patients represented about three percent of our patients. We realized a need to explore new ways to connect with the Hispanic community."

Good Shepherd Hospice's Bilingual Church Volunteer Team began in 2007 as a partnership with St. Ann Catholic Church in Haines City. That year, seven parishioners trained to become volunteers with the intended purpose to support Hispanic patients and their loved ones.

Catalina Mirles of Haines City is one of the original volunteers and still continues to donate her time to Good Shepherd Hospice. "This is a blessing," said Mirles. "It makes a big impact when patients open their doors and see someone who can speak to them."

Hispanic volunteers now donate their time across Polk County, where they routinely visit hospice patients in residential homes, nursing homes, assisted-living facilities and Good Shepherd Hospice Houses. In addition, they are on-call for around-the-clock vigil support for Hispanic patients and families. After Good Shepherd Hospice admits a Hispanic patient, each new family receives a reassurance phone call from a bilingual volunteer who offers additional support services from Spanish-speaking volunteers.

Good Shepherd Hospice addresses the medical, social, emotional and spiritual needs associated with a terminal diagnosis, and volunteers play an important role in the care the organization provides in its communities.

Volunteers visit patients once a week for approximately four hours. In that time, patients and volunteers can play board games, discuss current events, go for a walk, listen to music or just sit quietly. These visits can also provide family members with some valuable free time to grocery shop, run errands or attend to personal matters without worrying about their loved ones.

Facing that a loved one has a terminal disease is overwhelming. Some of the first challenges the bilingual volunteers must address are misconceptions about hospice care. "Many people believe that they can provide the best care for their loved ones," said Nina Gilbert, Good Shepherd Hospice volunteer manager. "Hospice does not take over or take charge. Our role is to support patients and their loved ones as they make the decisions to enhance their quality of life as they confront the challenges of advanced illnesses."

Last year, Good Shepherd Hospice trained additional volunteers from the Church of the Resurrection in South Lakeland, expanding the program across Polk County. Currently, 17 Hispanic volunteers are active in the program, and their efforts are showing. In 2009, Hispanic patients represented 4.7 percent of the patients receiving end-of-life care from Good Shepherd Hospice.

"All of us associated with Good Shepherd Hospice take great pride in this recognition," added Bredbenner. "We hope that we can set an example of how other hospices can reach all their patients in their communities."

But long-time volunteer Catalina Mirles observes that while the patients are grateful, volunteers gain something too. "This has changed my life," she said. "God has given me the strength to do this. I'm very happy to volunteer."

Florida Hospices created the Awards of Excellence program in order to identify, recognize and showcase the outstanding and innovative work of individual staff members and of programs across the state of Florida. Nominations were judged by a selection committee composed of members from the FHPC Forum Committee and the FHPC Best Practices Committee. The selection committee looked for examples and specific details that demonstrated how nominees have gone above and beyond expectations.

For more information about the Good Shepherd Hospice Bilingual Church Volunteer Team, contact Nina Gilbert at 863-297-1880.

About Good Shepherd Hospice

Good Shepherd Hospice is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that supports and serves approximately 750 patients each day in Polk, Highlands and

Hardee counties as they face the challenges of life-limiting illnesses. Healthcare professionals and trained volunteers embrace the Good Shepherd Hospice mission to make the most of life by relieving the suffering of patients and their families affected by end-of-life issues. The organization has been a part of the community since 1979 and is a 2008 recipient of a Circle of Life Citation of Honor Award. Good Shepherd Hospice programs are accredited by the Joint Commission, the nation's premier healthcare accrediting body. The United Way of Central Florida partially funds the community programs offered by Good Shepherd Hospice. For more information, please visit the website at www.goodshepherdhospice.org

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Photo caption: *Good Shepherd Hospice Volunteer Catalina Mirles and Good Shepherd Hospice Volunteer Manager Nina Gilbert celebrate after they accept an Award of Excellence from Florida Hospices and Palliative Care. Good Shepherd Hospice was recognized for its Bilingual Church Volunteer Team at Florida Hospices' 2010 Annual Forum in Orlando in May.*