

Connections make life better for those with advanced illness

By SYLVIA COLE

It's been more than 30 years since Calgary Hospice started running programs for those living with an advanced illness. And its members are still finding new ways to make connections and improve the lives of others.

Last fall the non-profit organization started the volunteer-run companion program, a family-centred and community-based approach offering those with any advanced illness (including Parkinsons and ALS, multi-organ conditions, cardiovascular disease and cancer) and their family members support and companionship.

"It's really intended to address the issue of isolation," said Ruth Kohurt, director of the Living with



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Calgary Hospice has started a Companion Program through its Living with Advanced Illness Centre. The aim is to match those living with an advanced illness with a volunteer who can provide companionship and resources.

Advanced Illness Centre about the companion program, offered for free to clients and their caregivers. Kohurt says people with advanced illness tend to lose

connections with others, as the ill person and caregiver's lives are consumed with multiple appointments and a change in physical abilities. "You can imagine

the family member has to give up a lot to optimize quality of life."

Since the companion program started running in late 2022, just shy of 20 matches have been made. Volunteers undergo a 12-hour training program before being matched with a client. If the match is successful, the pair schedules time for a weekly visit.

"The companion and the client do various activities, from helping with a pet or the garden, walking the dog, or getting to the doctor's appointment by providing transportation," said Kohurt. "It's about providing emotional and practical support to the individual, because it's about quality of life while living with an advanced illness."

The companion program is run through the Liv-

ing with Advanced Illness Centre, under the Calgary Hospice umbrella. There is also the Rosedale Hospice, a seven-bed facility in the city's northwest where end-of-life care is offered to those living with cancer, and the Children's Grief Centre which supports families with children aged 19 and under dealing with the death of someone close to them.

Robin Strathdee, a volunteer at the Rosedale Hospice, has started working with the companion program too. Her work at Rosedale includes supporting the family and patients with end-of-life care, whereas those who are part of the companion program have an advanced illness but are still very much living their life.

Connections on page 23

7 common scams targeting seniors

Connections continued from page 17

“He’s living life where he is,” Strathdee said of the man she was paired with. “I’m a tiny part of this, trying to provide some benefit through a positive relationship, laughter and enjoyment.”

Strathdee began volunteering for Calgary Hospice in 2021, after her dad died during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her mom had died eight years prior, and she had already volunteered with the MS Society, so Strathdee knew she was comfortable with illness and death.

“I’m drawn to work with people who don’t have the easiest circumstances,” she said, adding people sometimes get forgotten about when they go into long term care.

“I would say five per cent of people living in long term care actually have regular visitors. At least 80 per cent of people are on their own,” Strathdee observed. “The staff do the best they can with the resources they have, but the loneliness factor is high.”

Strathdee says she believes people drawn to become volunteers usually recognize the needs of people who are feeling lonely or isolated.

“Those with an advanced illness, their stories are important. They’re not their illness. We don’t walk around with a sign on our forehead saying, ‘I am cancer. I am MS.’ We have to remember that.”

For more information on the Companion Program, see hospicecalgary.ca/livingillness/peers/companion or call 403-263-4525.