

Raise awareness about end-of-life care



HELPING HANDS: The Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk (above) and some of the members of its staff including (back, from left) Nico Collado and Deb Murawski (front, from left) Verona Murray, Santhi Gosine, Tracy Ryan, Rose Surprise and Dr. John Ferraro.
-David Ambro photos



Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk provides families with in-home, inpatient care

By David Ambro

For people familiar with hospice, it can rekindle tears and tug at your heartstrings, and for those unfamiliar with this crucial end-of-life care, now is an important time to become more aware of the services that are offered.

November is National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month and no place is that more important than at the Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice House of Suffolk (VNSHS) at 101 Laurel Road in East Northport. The eight-bed facility opened in 2004, this month its 17th year anniversary. It is the first freestanding inpatient hospice in New York State, used as a national model for others. It is accessible to patients near and far, including out-of-state who want end-of-life care near their families on Long Island. And next year,

VNSHS, founded in 1952, will be celebrating its 70th anniversary, the first home nurse service in Suffolk County.

During an interview at the hospice house Monday, November 15, Director of Patient Services Connie Alexander and Social Work Supervisor Mary Denning talked about the importance of raising awareness about hospice services.

"Hospice is not a term that is commonplace in people's conversations or in their homes until somebody is diagnosed with a terminal illness that is untreatable. There is a stigma to it," Ms. Alexander said.

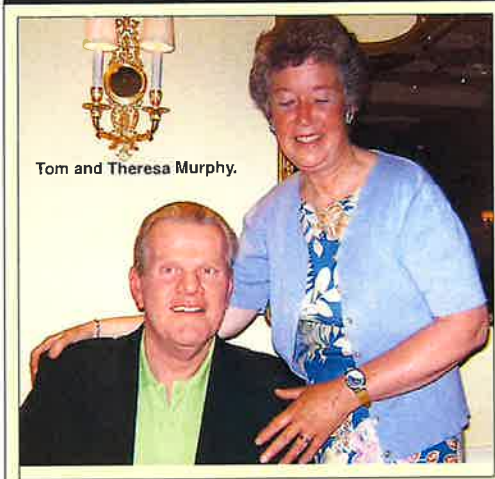
"It's a very negative stigma, plus we are not very open to talking about death and dying in this society. We are very uncomfortable with it, we don't want to deal with it, and we don't want to talk about

"So I think the awareness piece is huge. If you think about it, the only guarantee in life is that we are going to die and certainly we should be able to talk about how hospice facilitates that with comfort."

To be referred for hospice a doctor must determine a patient is not going to live for more than six months if the terminal illness takes its natural course, no further curative measures can be tried, and palliative care is called for.

"A lot of time that is met with doom and gloom and a lot of people don't know there are options to live with quality for the remaining time that they have. That's really where hospice comes into play," Ms. Denning. "We can make you comfortable when there is time and hopefully you can do some of the things you wish

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Tom and Theresa Murphy.

Forever grateful to Hospice House

By David Ambro

It's been a year since Theresa Murphy, of Greenlawn, lost her husband Tom to lung cancer but it still brings tears to her eyes to share the story.

Although bereaved at the loss of her beloved husband, Ms. Murphy has found some solace at having become part of the family at Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk (VNSHS) at 101 Laurel Avenue in East Northport where her husband died from lung cancer after a brief stay last year. Ms. Murphy was so moved by the care her husband received and treatment her family experienced at Hospice House that she now volunteers there and at the VNSHS community thrift shop at 345 Main Street in Huntington.

Ms. Murphy is a retired registered nurse from Huntington Hospital, where she worked for more than 34 years. Her husband battled lung cancer for two years, and they planned to do hospice at home. When his condition didn't allow it, though, he was transferred to Hospice House to better manage his pain and keep him safer and more content through the end of his life. He passed two days after he was admitted.

Ms. Murphy said she knew about Hospice House in East Northport but never had any personal experience with the facility until her husband was taken there. "I certainly didn't know about the volunteer program but after Tom passed there I decided I had to do something to give back," she said. "The experience was so unique and so powerful for me that I had to do something in return."

As a long-time hospital nurse, Ms. Murphy said she thought she knew what dying was like for a family through the experiences of her patients. "But when it's your husband, somebody you love so much, it's just so different and so special," she said, and cried. "The staff at Hospice House made it everything for me."

"I was able to stay with him night and day and just watch the care that they gave and the dignity they provide to their patients," Ms. Murphy said. "It was just so moving that I feel so blessed right now to be there as a volunteer."

As a Hospice House volunteer at the thrift shop, Ms. Murphy said she retired from health care and has found a new career in retail. She said that as a nurse she loved working with people and she now finds that same reward as a volunteer. She volunteers in the beginning of the week at the thrift shop and at the end of the week at Hospice House.

"I feel that I have gotten the best possible volunteer

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Rep. Suozzi at infrastructure bill signing

By David Ambro

Congressman Thomas Suozzi (D-Glen Cove), who represents parts of Smithtown, was at the White House Monday, November 15 for the ceremony at which President Joseph Biden signed into law the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

The bill passed the Senate 69-30 August 10, a bipartisan coalition in support of the legislation. The bill then passed the House of Representatives November 5, with 13 Republican Members of Congress crossing party lines to vote with Democrats. Rep. Lee Zeldin, the Republican candidate for governor in 2022, was the only member of the Long Island congressional delegation to vote against the bill. The two other congressmen representing parts of Suffolk County, Democratic Rep. Suozzi and Republican Rep. Andrew Garbarino (R-Bayport) voted for the legislation.

"This is a major accomplishment for the people of America, a bipartisan infrastructure bill with billions of dollars for roads and bridges, sewers and water, broadband, electric

charging vehicles, so many great accomplishments that will help so many people, create millions of jobs and make people's lives better," Rep Suozzi said in a video statement he released from the White House as the president prepared to sign the bill. "This is what people want. They want us to get things done for the people. I'm so happy to be here today. This is a great accomplishment for this president and for this Congress."

Rep. Suozzi said the bill signing Monday was a legislative package that has eluded the last four presidents. According to Rep. Suozzi, the legislation will create millions of high-paying union jobs and send billions of dollars to repair New York's highways, roads, bridges, airports, waterways and sewers - as well as to install hundreds of electric vehicle charging ports.

"The past four presidents have tried, but President Biden and this Congress got this bipartisan deal done," said Rep. Suozzi, who is co-chairman of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus in the House. "It takes bipartisanship to get



Thomas Suozzi at the White House for the bill signing Monday.

things done, and the signing of this once-in-a-generation legislation will rebuild New York and put millions to work. This is about jobs, this is about rebuilding our country, and it's about showing that we can get things done that have real-life impacts."

Rep. Suozzi released a list this week of the \$163.4 billion dollars of federal funding in the legislation that will directly benefit New York. It includes:

- Highway Funding: \$12.5 billion specifically for New

York, of which \$11.5 billion is for surface transportation (roads, highways, etc.), \$1.9 billion for a new vehicular bridge repair formula program; and \$142 million for EV charging infrastructure.

- Nearly \$1 billion in airport funding for New York: JFK \$294,682,575, LGA \$150,008,970, Long Island MacArthur \$21,595,630, Republic \$3,735,000, East Hampton \$1,480,000 and Brookhaven \$1,480,000.

- New York rail projects: \$16 billion for Amtrak

National capital backlog needs - \$688 million: will save NYS its contribution to replacing the Amtrak railcars that operate upstate, \$6 billion for Amtrak - Northeast Corridor (NEC) - capitol backlog of the NEC including the Gateway project, \$24 billion for Northeast Corridor Modernization - competitive grants that Gateway, Metro-North Penn Access, and East River tunnels are eligible for and \$12 billion for Intercity passenger rail including upgrades for high speed rail.

- At least \$90 billion for water infrastructure, including: \$14.7 billion for the EPA's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund which provides capitalization grants to states for loans supporting water infrastructure projects and \$55.4 billion in supplemental emergency appropriations for both the EPA state for capitalization grants through the Clean Water State Revolving Funds and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds.

- Public transportation funds of \$9.8 billion including clean buses and mass transit.

- A minimum of \$100 million over five years for broadband improvements.

DA-elect to make changes in prosecutors office

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names. "They are employed by other entities so I really can't name them right now but they are in place and I feel really good about those two picks," he said.

Mr. Sini's chief investigator is John Barry, a retired NYPD detective. Mr. Tierney made Mr. Barry a campaign issue, claiming he used his office to target a labor union to benefit his brother who was the head of a rival union. Mr. Tierney said Mr. Barry is going to be replaced and he knows that.

Beyond that, he indicated that he has people in mind for key positions, but that he has to take a closer look at the exact positions he intends to assign people to. "I'm trying to have as professional an office as I can. Fortunately for me, I have worked in a lot of other places so I want to get those people who I worked with in other places," he said. "I think the voters were pretty clear that they want a change, so that's what I'm going to do."

Mr. Tierney said it is frustrating when a political party takes over an office and their old political retreads are appointed. "So we are going to try to put together a professional office. We are going to revamp the office," he said.

Office issues

Mr. Tierney said the DA's office is finding it persistently difficult and frustrating to deal with criminal justice laws imposed by the state government, particularly the new bail laws and the new discovery requirements.

"The office finds it very onerous to deal with that. So we have to find a way to get them help to make sure they can comply with those discovery requests so we can move those cases forward in court," Mr. Tierney said.

Another lingering issue

is the political operation of the Suffolk County Police Benevolent Association

(PBA). For the past several election cycles, Suffolk County Legislator Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) has alleged that the PBA's political fundraising and campaign financing is unlawful and should be prosecuted. Mr. Trotta is a childhood friend of Mr. Tierney and one of his earliest supporters in the DA's race.

Mr. Tierney said he feels he has support from the rank and file of the police

department, and he said the disconnect between the membership and the union leadership is something that is going to have to be resolved within the PBA.

"I'm going to work with the county executive and I'm going to work with the PBA but I'm not going to work for them and I'm going to maintain my independence and I'm not going to excuse bad behavior," he said.

Conclusion

As he prepares to move into the DA's office, Mr. Tierney said he will work hard to earn

the trust the people have placed in him. "I want people in Suffolk County to feel as though they can have faith in their institutions and the way you do that is to serve the constituencies," he said.

Mr. Tierney said will have to work hard to revamp the office to get it where he wants it to be. "I think I have a tremendous opportunity and I'm going to take advantage of it. First things first, I have to get the right people in place and I'm cautiously optimistic that I'm going to be able to put together a really great team," he said.

Hospice care for husband led to a mission of volunteerism

(Continued from page 2)

experience thanks to Visiting Nurse Service and I'm so delighted they offer a volunteer program like they do," Ms. Murphy said. "They're a phenomenal organization. I cannot say enough about them."

Ms. Murphy shared her experience on the occasion of National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, which she said is important to help people better understand what this type of service means and how it can help a family through such a difficult time.

"I have found in my experience that the one problem is the language that we use," Ms. Murphy said. "People talk to patients and families about palliative care and they don't even know what that means. They need to say comfort care and they need to explain that it is not the equivalent of a mercy killing."

"What it does is give the patient the opportunity to have his pain managed, to have his needs met by people who are skilled and do nothing but that to give them the

dignity they need at the end of life and to help them with the process of transitioning from life into death," Ms. Murphy said. "It is a process and people go through it in their own way but it is really important to know that you can bring your patient to a hospital or an inpatient setting like this where they're skilled and they do nothing but that and they make the experience as important as it can be for the patient and for the family."

As important as the hospice program, Ms. Murphy said

the after death bereavement program was also critical for her. She said that for 13 months she was contacted by the hospice house staff to see how she was doing. The coronavirus (COVID-19) prevented her from participating in bereavement groups, but she said the outreach by the staff was tremendously helpful.

"They made themselves available for me anytime for 13 months," she said. "They don't forget about you and that does not happen in the regular setting."

Raising awareness about hospice care

(Continued from page 2)

to do and a gift of terminal illness is that there is time. We don't know how much but, a lot can be done with that time so this is an important topic to discuss and accept."

In her formative days at the Visiting Nurse Service Hospice House, Ms. Denning had a defining experience that shaped her perspective about hospice. She and a nurse were checking on the care of a patient, and he looked at Ms. Denning and waved a finger across the room at his family. "This is not about me. I have the easy part," he said. "It's them I'm worried about. Go ask them if they're okay."

"I thought he was absolutely right. It really shaped how I now go in with a nurse and let her deal with the patient and I deal with their family so nobody ever feels neglected," she said. "It is about working with them as intimately as possible to get them to a point where they leave this journey as unscathed as possible."

"We really want everyone to feel like they are at home. We call it a hospice house because that is really what our intent is, to make it your house—your home away from home," Ms. Alexander said.

For a facility treating the terminally ill, the coronavirus (COVID-19) was a trying time at the hospice house. Ms. Denning said some beds would turn over two or three times in a day. Four of the eight rooms in the facility were retrofitted with special negative-pressure air exchange systems to accommodate COVID patients without impacting the other patients in the facility.

By the time COVID patients reached the hospice house they passed away quickly. "It was a very emotional and very scary time for the people in the community and a very emotional and scary time for the staff members," Ms. Alexander said. "You're a nurse, so of course you are a health care professional who knows how to take those precautions. But the idea that you are at such a high risk at any moment is terrifying. So we are really lucky our staff stepped it up and continued to work here despite the risk of becoming infected themselves."

"COVID was definitely difficult. You had people who were running 5ks and a week and a half later they are laying in one of our rooms," Ms. Denning added. "So that was a difficult process."

Despite the challenges COVID presented, the hospice house staff strived to uphold its mantra of providing a homelike setting for families. In one instance in August 2020 they staged a wedding in the memorial garden so a patient could participate. "How awesome is that?" Ms. Denning asked.

Ms. Alexander said it was a beautiful event arranged by Ms. Denning, Hospice House Volunteer Coordinator Bonnie Gruber, and team assistant Tracey Ryan. "It was awesome. It was beautiful," she said.

"And it was perfectly timed because the patient passed the next day," Ms. Denning added.

Also during COVID an elderly man came to the hospice house from an assisted living facility and they made arrangements for his grandchildren to serenade him through the windows.

"It was very hard during COVID because we wanted these patients to have their families at their bedside. There was such a balance that had to be made with the protection of the staff and the other patients," Ms. Alexander said, adding that by keeping the staff safe the facility never closed during COVID and instead underwent safety enhancements that makes it better equipped for the future.

As for the present, Ms. Alexander knocked on the wooden table in front of her. "We're in a pretty good place. We have not had a COVID patient in quite some time," she said, adding that there have been some COVID patients at home in the field sporadically but that they have recovered. "But we haven't had any terminal COVID patients in quite some time now and we're hoping it stays that way."

In summation about operating a hospice house through a global pandemic, Ms. Alexander said it was the ultimate learning experience. "When you go

though an experience like COVID you learn a whole heck of a lot," she said. "We learned what it is like to be in a pandemic. It is unprecedented. No one I know who is still alive has been alive during a plague or a pandemic like this. It was uncharted waters for us. But we survived it."

In addition to raising awareness in the community about hospice care, Ms. Denning said National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month has a tendency to raise morale among the staff. "When you get a glimpse at human suffering the way we see people come in here, we get a sense of relief when someone has a comfortable death and if you are not in this field of work it is hard to hear that," she said. "That for us is what makes this all worthwhile."

The operation of the hospice house is not financially self-sustaining from patient coverage and relies on donations to sustain its budget. To donate, go to the VNSHHS website, visitingnurseservice.org, call the office at 505 Main Street in Northport Village at 631-261-7200, or shop at its thrift shop at 345 Main Street in Huntington.

In addition to its hospice program, the Visiting Nurse Service offers a respite program at the hospice house, where families can bring terminally ill patients for five days to get a break from home care. "The sole purpose of it is caregiver burnout," Ms. Alexander said, adding that it is for patients

who are already in a hospice program.

Ms. Denning said she speaks to family members with a home hospice situation and can tell sometimes from the tone of their voice that they are candidates for the respite program. She said many times these are people catapulted into caregiving and they are unfamiliar with how difficult it can be. She said the hospice house tries to help guide them through that experience.

During National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, hospice and palliative care programs across the country are reaching out to raise awareness. "Every year, nearly 1.4 million people living with a life-limiting illness receive care from hospices in this country," National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization President and Chief Executive Officer Edo Banach said. "These highly trained professionals ensure that patients and families find dignity, respect and love during life's most difficult journey."

Hospice and palliative care programs provide pain management, symptom control, psychosocial support and spiritual care to patients and their families when a cure is not possible. These programs combine the highest level of quality medical care with the emotional and spiritual support that families need most when facing a serious illness or the end of life.

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