

Is Death Honored or Ignored? **by Carmen Bowman**

A premise of the culture change movement is honoring individuals in both life and death. The culture change movement calls attention to the problem of ignoring residents when they die. Have you seen deaths ignored? Friends who live with a deceased resident find out later through the grapevine. Could it be different? Yes, it can be better. Culture change leaders have raised awareness by asking, “What does it cause a remaining resident to feel?” Like his or her life didn’t matter, which is a message that cannot be sent. The risk of this message is so detrimental that leading pioneer homes such as Fairport Baptist Home in Fairport, New York, tackled this issue head on.

How has death typically been treated in a nursing home, perhaps in assisted living as well? Out the back door in most cases. Someone dies, the body is taken out the back door and belongings placed into a trash bag— the unintended message just isn’t okay anymore.

Nursing homes are implementing many beautiful practices instead that gracefully acknowledge a resident’s passing. Chimes are played over the intercom in some homes. Most culture changed homes do not use the overhead paging anymore, since that is the mark of living in an institution, not a home. However, the possibility to use it for such an announcement becomes a blessing in disguise. Depending upon the community, perhaps a chosen song, hymn or chorus is played.

The chimes or song indicate at Fairport Baptist Home that a resident just passed away, and a bedside memorial service will be held in a short time. Everyone in the community was taught how to do a bedside memorial. This doesn’t mean everyone is required to do so, but for those who are, they are equipped to step up to lead the ceremony. Materials are provided such as readings from represented faith traditions. This is a respectful way to honor the person before his or her body leaves the home.

At Cherry Creek Care Center in Aurora, Colorado, chimes played over the intercom indicate there will be a procession of a resident who has passed away, beginning at his or her room to and through the front door. Residents, any family members in the building, team members, visitors, corporate team members and consultants all gather in the hallway to pay respects to the person as he or she passes by. Tears flow. I’ve stood there, I know. And why? Because it is so reverent and honoring, you can’t help but cry.

In some homes, a rose is placed at the person's place at the table for a certain number of days. And in others, a flower is placed near a memory book in a designated place for anyone to have the opportunity to share memories.

Leaders in the culture change movement, Debbie and Barry Barkan of the Live Oak Project in California, also learned to include honoring deaths of residents in their daily community meetings. At community meetings, many things happen, one of which is to remember, mourn and celebrate a person's life. By sharing life out loud with residents and fellow team members, the Live Oak community realized how much it is needed to be able to talk, cry and remember, and *not* to ignore fellow residents with whom they all shared life.

Postscript:

In Wyoming, Morning Star Care Center in Washakie has involved the people living and working there in deciding how they want a person to be honored when he or she dies. They say goodbye while chosen music plays and the person is escorted out the front door. Watch for more in the Clearinghouse section of the WCCC coalition website of great ideas shared in Wyoming.

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