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Volunteers lend a hand, and often an ear, in the ER

By Andrew Oxford

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No one ends up in the emergency room because they are having a good day. But if Maria Grazia Selzer can improve that day just a little, she has done her job.

“How you can make that day better is just the basics — listening, talking,” the former radiologic technologist recounted one afternoon at Holy Cross Hospital, where she volunteers in the emergency department as a patient advocate.

A 2-year-old program spearheaded by physicians and longtime hospital auxiliary members, the volunteer effort has brought community members into a part of the community most don't think about until they end up there themselves — the emergency room.

With nurses and other staff busy tending to a flow of patients that enter the only emergency department in Taos County, volunteers lend a hand with everything from cleaning rooms to assisting with registration and preparing kits for lab tests. The goal is to provide a liaison between medical staff, patients and families.

Sometimes, though, an advocate's most important task is to lend a sense of calm to what can often be a frantic place by listening, talking or simply bearing witness.

Often, being a patient advocate is more about working with the families than the patients themselves.

“Sometimes, it's more for the family,” said Cindy Atkins, a volunteer. “Sometimes you have a mother who's lying in a bed and she couldn't get a babysitter so she brought them and they're scared.”

In that case, Atkins said, advocates haul out toys and stuffed animals.

In other instances, advocates sit at the bedside and listen as an entire life is recounted.

Sometimes, it's a whole life story, other times merely what landed them in the emergency room.

No one wants to be forgotten, Atkins added, explaining that listening is one way to ensure a patient does not feel lost amid the hospital's commotion.

On other days, advocates help patients understand what is going on around them — that nurses are busy with another patient, for example.

The program, some admit, is not for everyone.

Unsurprisingly, it has mostly attracted those who once worked in hospitals or as first responders — retired technicians, a firefighter, a health care executive.

The program currently has 15 active volunteers.

That includes two classes of volunteers who have completed training, the last round of which comprised eight hours of instruction followed by mentoring from a tenured advocate.

Monthly meetings continue to serve as a debriefing and a roundtable where hospital staff can discuss best practices.

Part of the hospital auxiliary, the program has been coordinated since its inception by outgoing chief medical officer Dr. Loretta Ortiz y Pino.

The idea came from physicians who noted other hospitals have similar programs.

Advocates do not have run of the emergency department, either.

But two years since the program launched, they are finding a place.

Anyone interested in volunteering as a patient advocate is encouraged to contact the Holy Cross Hospital Auxiliary by calling (575) 751-5728 or visiting the hospital's gift shop.



Courtesy Taos Health Systems

The first class of patient advocates in 2013.