

# Prison Hospice: From the Inmate Hospice Volunteers' Perspective – A “Snapshot”

By Barry R. Ashpole

A QUOTE FROM AN EARLIER ARTICLE I authored, “I’m somebody that nobody thought I could be,” attributed to a prison inmate at Iowa State Penitentiary, continues to resonate.<sup>1</sup> The quote captures the very spirit and intent of prison hospice. They are the words of Bertrum ‘Herky’ Burkett, who died in January 2024. Herky left an indelible impression on all those that came into contact with him. His unwavering commitment to the prison’s hospice program, coupled with his exceptional powers of observation, boundless compassion, and profound empathy, positioned him as the quintessential individual for the role of an end-of-life caregiver. His dedication was unparalleled, and those privileged to work alongside him can attest to this wholeheartedly.<sup>2</sup>



‘Herky’ with fellow hospice volunteers at Iowa State Penitentiary. (‘Prison Terminal...’ <https://bit.ly/46sspYC>)

While the terminally ill are clearly the intended beneficiaries of hospice, the impact on those who volunteer in providing end-of-life care to fellow prison inmates is profound. In Herky’s words:

*And we always wondered who was gonna be the last one living to take care of the rest of ‘em. Well, when they brought in a hospice, it gave us an avenue to take care of each other. In order to get in here, they’re pretty sick. They’re dyin’. So you’re dealin’ with them knowin’ that it doesn’t matter what you do. You’re not helpin’ them to live. All you’re doin’ is makin’ their passing easier. We hold their hands. We pray. And we bathe ‘em. We feed ‘em, make sure they eat. We take ‘em to the yard. We take care of all the things that they need. And when that patient has a family, his family is allowed to come back in here to the hospice. When I started hospice, I thought it would be about what I can give to the patient, what I could do for that patient to make ‘em feel better. But when you do what you do, the feeling that you get back from them, you can’t even describe it.<sup>1</sup>*

A concept unique to the U.S., prison hospice, which is based on peer-caregiving, is gaining traction in the literature. For example, the evidence from the California-based Humane Prison Hospice Project underscores the profound impact of inmate caregiving, showcasing instances of empathy from hardened gang members and stories of redemption among people in prison serving lengthy sentences. The person-centred care facilitates a humanising experience for all involved.<sup>3</sup>

Findings of another U.S. study suggest that “inmate-caregivers” believe they provide a unique and necessary adaptation to prison-based end-of-life care resulting in multilevel benefits. These additional perceived benefits go beyond a marginalized group gaining access to patient-centered end-of-life care and include potential inmate-caregiver rehabilitation, correctional medical staff feeling supported, and correctional facilities meeting end-of-life care mandates. Additional research is imperative, however, to work toward greater standardization of, and access to, end-of-life care for the incarcerated.<sup>4</sup>

One study explored the motivations of inmate hospice volunteers. Participants expressed complex motivations; inter-related themes on personal growth, social responsibility, and ethical service to vulnerable peers suggested that inmate caregivers experience an underlying process of personal and social transformation, from hospice as a source of positive self-identity to peer-caregiving as a foundation for community.<sup>5</sup>

Few studies, however, have examined how hospice inmate volunteers cope with the death of those in their care. Understanding the bereavement needs of hospice volunteers and how prison hospice volunteers navigate grief and remain committed to providing excellent hospice care can help inform the grief processes and practices of hospice care professionals.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of prison hospice has a profound effect on the givers and recipients of compassionate end-of-life care.

## References:

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