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State certifies need for Marietta WellStar hospice

by Kim Isaza and Katy Ruth Camp
 newseditor@mdjonline.com
 krcamp@mdjonline.com
 06.29.10 - 11:00 pm



The Georgia Department of Community Health has granted a Certificate of Need for an inpatient hospice home to be built in Marietta, and construction could begin by the end of the year.

Executives of the WellStar Foundation announced in April 2009 that they would begin raising an estimated \$12 million needed for a similar facility in Marietta, plus \$5 million for an endowment fund to help patients who can't afford hospice care.

Tracey Atwater, president of the WellStar Foundation, said more than \$13 million has been raised toward the total \$17 million needed for the Marietta hospice home, which will have space for 18 patients at any one time.

"We have \$1.2 million left to raise for the facility, and \$2.7 million left to raise for the endowment," she said. "It is our hope that we will complete our fundraising campaign and be able to begin construction before the end of the year."

The 27,622-square-foot hospice home will be built at 475 Dickson Ave., off Kennesaw Avenue in the shadow of Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park, in Marietta.

WellStar Community Hospice currently operates one inpatient hospice facility, the 18-bed Tranquility, near its hospital in Austell. WellStar's data shows more people in Cobb and nearby counties are in need of end-of-life care.

"We know that within three years, we will no longer be able to handle the anticipated patient volumes at our current facility," she said. "We serve over 700 patients per year in our current facility, and we expect a similar census in the new facility."

CDH Partners, of Marietta, is the architect, and Cork Howard Construction

is the contractor, Atwater said. Construction is estimated to last between nine to 12 months.

Dr. Michael Andrews, WellStar's chief cancer officer, has worked with hospice in various formats for 20 years. Hospice can be done in a patient's home, at a nursing home or at a residential hospice site such as the one planned for Marietta, he said.

Hospice offers social services, counseling and support services, pain management, prescription filling and education for the patient and family, he said. Hospice nurses and counselors can often prevent unnecessary trips to the emergency room, which is one reason Medicare and most health insurers cover hospice services, he said.

To be eligible for hospice, patients must have a full-time caregiver.

"Someone who would go to an inpatient facility usually has more problems that requires greater level of care. They usually have a life expectancy of three months or less," Andrews said.

The average hospice stay is six days, and Andrews said he believes hospice help is underutilized.

"Recommending hospice to patients is an art form in and of itself. A lot of patients have misconceptions about hospice, that it's where you go to die and you're giving up on them. The truth is, there does come a time when it's not reasonable to give further treatments to a cancer patient, either because you don't have any other good treatments to give, or the patient can't make it to the treatments."

"They get better care through hospice than they would coming in to my office every two weeks," he said.

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