

Caldwell Hospice & Palliative Care

Cathy Swanson's Presentation

Good afternoon. I am Cathy Swanson, Chief Executive Officer of Caldwell Hospice & Palliative Care. I am here to share the petition we are filing today for a special need adjustment in the 2021 State Medical Facilities Plan for six hospice inpatient beds in Watauga County.

Caldwell Hospice & Palliative Care is a licensed, Medicare certified hospice home care agency with over 38 years' experience. We are known as pioneers in the hospice industry, opening NC's first freestanding hospice inpatient care unit on February 1, 1989. The Stevens Patient Care Unit, a six-bed facility, has served as a national hospice facility model for over three decades. We opened a second freestanding facility, the 12-bed Forlines Patient Care Unit, in 2010. Both were constructed without any debt thanks to the generous support of our community.

In 2012, leaders from Appalachian Regional Healthcare System in Watauga County asked us to consider providing hospice and palliative medicine services in the High Country counties of Ashe, Avery, and

Watauga. After developing a comprehensive business plan based on a thorough study of the percent of county deaths served by hospice and available hospice services in the area, we opened a hospice workstation in Boone in late January 2014. We have a full interdisciplinary team of over 30 staff members and 24 volunteers who live and work in the High Country service area. We provide home hospice services, inpatient palliative medicine consults in area hospitals and the Seby B. Jones Regional Cancer Center in Boone, and we serve nearly 70 patients per day in community palliative medicine services; services provided by an experienced physician and team of nurse practitioners. Caldwell Hospice & Palliative Care has been privileged to serve 987 patients and their families and nearly 500 palliative medicine patients as of May 2020.

Over the last three years, from 2017 to 2019, our service to the residents of Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties has grown dramatically while the largest provider serving the area has experienced flat or declining utilization. In fact, our growth in the service area has been the driving force behind the overall growth in hospice deaths and days of care in the three-county area. It's also important to note that although Caldwell Hospice & Palliative Care has less than 30 percent market share in total hospice days of care provided to the residents of this three-county area,

we provided nearly 50 percent of the total inpatient and respite days of care in 2019. We are petitioning the State Health Coordinating Council to include an adjusted need determination for six hospice inpatient beds in Watauga County so we will have the opportunity to seek CON approval to develop a freestanding hospice facility where we can fulfill our mission to provide the High Country residents with access to full hospice services, including inpatient and respite care in the most appropriate setting.

Today, there is no hospice facility located anywhere in the entire seven-county region that makes up the High Country of North Carolina. When hospice patients in Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties need inpatient care for acute symptom management or respite care to relieve caregivers from 24/7 care, they have no options other than to be admitted to a local hospital or nursing facility bed, or to travel long distances to be admitted to a freestanding hospice facility in another county.

Acute care settings like hospitals and nursing facilities are not ideal for providing hospice care. The hospice care provided in those settings can be fragmented and the hospice philosophy of care can become lost, creating a less than ideal end-of-life experience for dying patients and

their families. But because of the integrated nature of hospice care, families often want to keep their loved one nearby to spend as much time as possible with them, and in the High Country, that leaves acute care settings as the only option.

The closest freestanding hospice facilities are Burke Hospice and Palliative Care in Burke County and our two patient care units in Caldwell County. These range from almost an hour and a half to a three-hour round-trip drive for patients in Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties in ideal weather conditions. Anyone familiar with the mountainous terrain and unpredictable weather conditions in winter months, knows that travel conditions in this part of western North Carolina are very often not ideal. This distance and challenging travel create a significant burden for a hospice patient's loved ones, especially the elderly.

The need methodology in the SMFP shows there is enough demand in Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties combined to support six hospice inpatient beds. We understand that there is no mechanism in the methodology for triggering a need determination in any single county with a deficit of less than six beds, and there is no mechanism for considering the combined need of multiple counties to create a need

determination in any one county. We support that methodology and we are not advocating for a change to the standard methodology to eliminate the six-bed minimum or to consider multi-county service areas. However, we believe our petition makes a clear and compelling case that the residents of Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties deserve access to a local, freestanding hospice facility and there is enough volume of hospice patients in the area to support a six-bed facility located in Watauga County.

As a hospice provider, we see the need for a hospice facility as we provide care for residents in Ashe, Avery, and Watauga counties but the driving force behind the timing of this petition is a strong, motivated community group of High Country citizens who have experienced the barriers to inpatient hospice care in the High Country community, who have heard stories from neighbors and friends and believe their community deserves more. Together, we come to you with this important request and appreciate your time and consideration.