

Local medical professionals, organizations working on home health solutions

STEPHEN ELLIOTT, Staff Reporter | Posted: Wednesday, July 20, 2016 4:43 pm

A mosaic of healthcare nonprofits, independent medical professionals and others are in the process of putting together an organization that could make palliative care easier to access for patients living in remote mountain communities.

The group will start in the immediate Telluride and Mountain Village area, but thinks the model could eventually be implemented in other areas, including Norwood, Nucla, Naturita and Rico, Telluride Medical Center Primary Care Director Dr. Sharon Grundy told the San Miguel County Board of Commissioners at their meeting Tuesday.

“I’ve been practicing here for 15 years, and we’ve always struggled with home health and especially end-of-life care and hospice care,” she said.

Until last summer, home health and palliative care was extremely limited in the region, but Telluride Medical Center, Tri-County Health Network and Pasco Home Health out of Cortez partnered to expand those services. A new grant, from the Saul Zaentz Charitable Foundation, will allow TCHN and TMC to hire a part-time program director to develop a new organization that will streamline home health services in the region.

Palliative care is specialized medical care for serious illness that aims to improve quality of life for patients and families, according to a press release.

The new program director will set up a structure and manage it so that, Grundy said, “the hope is six months from now, if I have a patient diagnosed with a terminal disease, and they want to be able to stay in Telluride or Mountain Village, they can call this organization and there will be a person who’s able to help them navigate the different programs out there.”

Some of the problems facing those seeking home health in the area are economical — there are too few patients spread out over too large of a geographic area. Because of that, the few qualified nurses participating in the existing program are spread thin, Grundy said.

A future could also rely on some volunteer labor, “but we shouldn’t rely on that,” she said. “We should create entity that’s sustainable, where we’re not going to burn anybody out, and they’re going to feel valued.”

The new program director will work with an advisory committee to “develop an organization to identify services, engage with strategic partners, conduct a community readiness assessment, complete a needs-assessment to find gaps in care, and create a volunteer program to help provide support to families and primary caregivers,” according to a press release.

A lack of home health options leads to older and sicker community members being forced to leave that

community, Grundy said,

Though the group is initially focused on the Telluride and Mountain Village area, Grundy said it could eventually be put in place in other communities.

“Right now we’re focused on what we’re doing here, but if there are little holes in different places maybe we can take this model to different counties,” she said.

The county commissioners thanked Grundy for the presentation.

“We invited you guys to come because people come and ask us what to do. There’s this great need,” Commissioner Joan May said.

“I’m really happy to hear how much progress you’ve been making,” Commissioner Amy Levek added. “It’s absolutely a needed service.”