

▲ **SHERWOOD CARE STORY**

March 2019

▲ **Providing comfort and support  
during end-of-life and bereavement**



HQCA's team met with Kathy Fortunat, the director of care and chief executive officer, of Sherwood Care to explore why their facility ranks first in the Edmonton Zone in the Health Quality Council of Alberta's (HQCA) 2017 Long-term Care Family Experience Survey.

She conveys her vision as a leader, "It's all about the resident's and family's journey, and everything within reason should be done to facilitate that journey." Kathy also emphasizes the importance of listening to and supporting her employees, believing that "happy staff equals happy residents and families."

*"If you come and talk to residents about quality, they will tell you the soft things – how they were treated when the staff came in in the morning, how they were treated with dignity and respect and called by name. They talk about the human interactions."*

Kathy,  
director of care and  
chief operating officer

She provides many examples of how the leadership at Sherwood Care helps to facilitate that journey, and provide support for their employees: being visible on the units and routinely interacting with residents, family members and staff to foster open communication and build trust; encouraging decisions about resident's care to be made as close to the front lines as possible, by employees who know the residents and families best; acknowledging staff for their contributions and hard work through weekly staff appreciation events; and, using hiring practices that identify emotional intelligence, 'soft skills', and an applicant's ability to work as a team member.

Perhaps the most notable example, however, of facilitating the resident's and family's journey and providing support to employees, are descriptions Kathy provides regarding Sherwood Care's 'dignity and death protocol.'

Death is commonplace in long-term care facilities (in 2017, 47 of the 100 residents died at Sherwood Care). Yet, death, loss, and grief is not always very well acknowledged in the long-term care environment. At Sherwood Care, staff endeavor to recognize that for residents this home

is their "final stop" and have improved in many ways their approach to end-of-life care and bereavement for the benefit of residents, families, and staff. Our HQCA team learns about the evolution of these improvements and their value through discussions with Adam, the Sherwood Care chaplain, and Amanda, their social worker, as well as from volunteers, residents, and families.

Staff at Sherwood Care were motivated to improve how they provided support to grieving family members after reflecting on a particular situation. Adam and Amanda recall a time where family members were out of town when their loved one died. When they arrived at Sherwood Care, their family member's room had been cleaned and their belongings "boxed up." It was upsetting for them to see the room without its familiar personal furniture and decorations, and the cleaned room made it difficult for them to say goodbye and for closure to occur. Now, at Sherwood Care, it is common practice to "respect the space." This means leaving the room "untouched for 48 hours" after remaking the bed with a personal quilt or blanket and placing a silk rose on the pillow.



### Providing comfort and support – continued

As Kathy's previous comment articulates, it is also important that practices and routines at Sherwood Care benefit and support the employees. In the case of their 'dignity and death protocol', this means finding ways to better help staff members cope with the loss of residents. Staff, for example, expressed a need to find better ways to inform them of a resident's death. They were unexpectedly learning of the death of a resident who they cared for and loved, after arriving for their shift and discovering a friend missing from their room, or absent from their place at the dining room table. Now, to better support staff and reduce this element of surprise, notices are posted at the staff entranceway, and in the recreation office (for volunteers who may not use the staff entrance) of any residents who have recently died, and a silk rose is placed outside the resident's door. While it is still upsetting for staff to learn that one of their friends has died, they now learn of the death in an expected and predictable way by the familiar presence of the posted note and silk rose.

Noteworthy is the story that Adam and Amanda tell that is the impetus for change for the benefit of residents. The story begins by recalling a particular resident's comment to management, "Do you think we don't know what's going on?"

Here, the resident refers to the familiar practice of putting a deceased body in a black bag and removing it out the back door to minimize living residents' exposure to death. This resident suggested a preferred approach, "I came in through the front door, and I want to go out the front door and not out of some dimly lit back hallway."

Adam explains how this comment impacted staff at Sherwood Care, "we realized residents are more aware of what is happening than we were giving them credit for." The residents understand that someone has died, but by concealing death, they may think "we have put the person through a laundry chute," to secretly remove the body from the building.



"Unfortunately, this becomes the narrative they use to answer the question, 'what is going to happen to me?'"

Staff were well intentioned in their efforts to hide death, but their actions were upsetting and could be perceived as being "disrespectful to residents." Staff realized that residents want to know that their wishes and preferences will be respected at the end-of-life, and to do this, they needed to develop better ways of acknowledging and talking about death.

### The 'walkout' procession; an opportunity for "everyone to say good-bye"

Now, at Sherwood Care, when a resident dies, they leave out the front door as part of a walkout procession. Before the walkout, time is spent to ensure that the resident's body is prepared according to requests by the resident or family. This may include dressing them in specific clothes, shaving a face, or providing other personal touches. The resident's body is then covered, and the 'Sherwood Garden' quilt, a special blanket made by a volunteer, is placed over them in preparation for the walkout.

An overhead announcement signals that other activities should stop, "*Our friend Mrs. or Mr. \_\_\_\_ is leaving the building for the last time. We invite you to join us in the procession to offer your respects.*" Family members walk behind the stretcher and are escorted by Adam and a few other staff members, while residents and other staff line up along the hallway. The walkout is beautifully symbolic of all the interrelationships that develop between a resident, family, and staff.

Amanda explains, "The walkout helps both the family and staff say good-bye" because "staff lose their relationship with the resident and the family too." It is a final tribute not only for family members to honour their loved one, but an opportunity for staff to offer their respect to a person they have intimately cared for, laughed with, and loved. The walkout is also important for residents as it provides them a chance to acknowledge the loss of a roommate, friend, and tablemate, and also with the assurance that this same level of respect will be offered to them when they die.

## Enhancing Experiences in Long-term Care

### The walkout procession – continued

#### Sam is a current volunteer at Sherwood Care, and is also family alumni.

Her mother died in January 2018 after two and a half years living at Sherwood Care. In our conversation, she describes her dad as the wittier and funnier parent, but with dementia, and the “removal of a filter or two,” her mom “was always coming up with these unexpected comments that made us all laugh.” One morning Sam was informed that her mom’s flu had worsened and was advised to come to Sherwood Care as quickly as possible. The drive though was slow, hindered by winter roads. Her mom died minutes before she arrived but in the company of staff. She recalls needing to console staff, “I could see that they were grieving.”

When sharing her experiences with the walkout, she says, “We got the royal treatment going out. It was a wonderful moment of tribute with residents, staff, and visitors lining the hallways.”

*“Every staff member lined the halls, and the dining room by the front door was full of residents. The walkout procession was a form of closure, and it felt very honoring. My sister and I felt loved and part of the bigger Sherwood family of other residents, family members, and staff. It was a truly wonderful experience.”*

*Sam,  
volunteer and family alumni*

*“Mom loved having fun, and taking part in the various activities and parties. She truly loved the staff. It really seemed like Sherwood brought out the best in her.”*

*Sam,  
volunteer and family alumni*

“Everyone was in their pajamas and fuzzy slippers,” Sam recalls, laughing. It was pajama day at Sherwood Care, an annual event held the second Friday of January. With her mom’s sense of humor in mind, she reflects on the PJ themed walkout, “My mom picked this day.” Even Gerald (Sherwood Care’s former CEO) was present and dressed in his blue robe and slippers and was the last person Sam hugged as she stood in front of the vehicle that took her mom away. “It was such a great exit for Mom. We knew she was loved. This was clearly her day, and it was perfect. She would’ve loved it too.”

#### Maureen, another family member, describes the walkout similarly.

“It was amazing, it truly was.” Maureen, her brother, and her mother’s husband were joined by two nurses; one nurse came to work on her day off to participate in the walkout. “The nurses held my hands and walked behind the gurney.” She continues, “When I turned around, all of the staff were following us.” When it was time to put her mother in the van, a nurse spoke up and said a beautiful tribute and prayer. “When my Dad died we were herded out of the hospital room” but the walkout was “heartfelt and beautiful.” The walkout was so impactful that Maureen’s brother didn’t “feel the need for a funeral.” At the walkout, “we felt the closure.”

The **walkout** helped Sam and Maureen come to terms with the death of a parent, but they also saw the value it had for staff. The walkout, Maureen illuminates, is **an opportunity for “everyone to say good-bye.”**

## The memorial service; the value for residents

One of our HQCA team members was honoured to attend a Sherwood Care **monthly memorial service**. Below is a description of her observations.

*I sit in the corner and watch Adam greet family members. Photos of two older men sit in frames alongside flowers and a candle at the front of the room. A small crowd of residents, family members, and staff is assembled in the atrium.*

*Adam welcomes the audience, "We are here today for a sad occasion, but we are grateful to have the opportunity to say good-bye."*

*After a prayer and song, Adam pauses, "We feel the loss of our family and friends today. We ate together and worshipped with them. We miss them and their family. Their family spent time with us. Let's take the time to remember these gentlemen."*

*Adam tells stories about each man's life providing highlights from their childhood, career, and family life. He skillfully interweaves personal anecdotes and memories he shares with family members that are present in the audience. He also addresses an individual resident directly, "I know you miss your friend and have a new roommate now. I hope that you are making a new friend."*

*As the service unfolds, Adam intertwines messages of mortality, comfort in God's companionship, and hope.*

*In conversation, I ask Adam about the value of the memorial service for residents. "I want to help people acknowledge the loss and be ok with the grief and acknowledge their own death" because the "loss of a friend is a reminder of one's own mortality."*

*This purpose helps me to understand his selection of hymns that reinforce the comforting message that we are not alone as we carry on: "we carry on together." The remembering component of the service, Adam explains, is important too. It "gives residents dignity in death." It also "let's living residents know that death is not something to be afraid of but is a part of life." It is a way to respect residents and shows them that "they will be taken care of even after death."*

## Honoring interrelationships between residents, staff, and family members



Honoring the relationship between the resident and family is central to Sherwood's 'dignity and death protocol,' but also front of mind are the relationships current residents and staff members had with the residents who died. At Sherwood Care, staff aim to ease the transition from life to death in ways that respect the individuality of residents and the significant relationships of which they are a part. The examples of the walkout and memorial service provide a glimpse into some of the ways that dignity in death is achieved.



## Honouring interrelationships – continued

The following is a list of many of the other ways support for residents, families, and staff is achieved at Sherwood Care:

- ✓ Intentional discussions are had during admission, initial and annual care conferences, and other times to discuss the death process, identify individual plans and wishes, and address any concerns or questions.
- ✓ A room called Quiet Haven is available to provide privacy for the resident and family, if it is needed, when a resident is placed on the 'end of life pathway.'
- ✓ A comfort cart is available to family members that includes books, phone chargers, music, word games, tea and water, comfort packs, and other pertinent items to assist them with lengthy or overnight visits.
- ✓ Residents are cared for by someone from their usual care team, who is most familiar to them.
- ✓ Volunteers, who are specifically chosen and trained, are available to residents at end-of-life who don't have anyone there to support them, or if a family member or friend needs a break.
- ✓ Someone is available from the administration team, regardless of the time of day or day of the week, to provide support and assistance to family members and/or staff.
- ✓ Silk roses, which are kept in a location for all staff to retrieve, are placed on the door and pillow of the deceased resident as a way for staff and residents who have missed the announcement or procession to be aware of the death.
- ✓ A resident's bed is made as if they were away and the room is left untouched for 48 hours to "respect the space" and provide space for family, staff, and other residents to say good-bye.
- ✓ A new resident is not admitted for approximately 5 to 6 days which allows staff members the opportunity to prepare emotionally for a new person to occupy the room.
- ✓ 'Remembering cards' are used for staff to record special thoughts or memories about a resident. The original is given to the family at the in-house memorial service, and a copy is placed in a memories book for future reminiscing.
- ✓ A poster is placed on a bulletin board by the staff entrance, with a resident photo and date of the death, to inform employees of residents who have recently died. This occurs so that staff are notified of the death before they arrive at the nursing station. An additional notice is posted in the recreation office, to inform volunteers who often come through the front doors of the facility.
- ✓ An in-house memorial service hosted by the chaplain occurs once a month. The chaplain tells stories about residents from personal experience and using information recorded in the social history by recreation services.
- ✓ A tea time is held after memorial services to provide time for connections and memory sharing.
- ✓ Staff debriefs, hosted by the chaplain and social worker, are provided as needed and especially during times of high resident turnover, to process and discuss questions like: 'Who have you lost?', or 'What will you remember?' Additional employee assistance is available as needed.

*As told by Jamie Stroud, and Jessie Gish - Health System Improvement Leads, Health Quality Council of Alberta.*

HQCA would like to thank the staff and volunteers of Sherwood Care, as well as residents and family members for sharing their story with us.

Sherwood Care is one of a group of facilities that had either shown statistically significant improvements in certain dimensions of care, between the HQCA's 2014-15 and 2017 Long Term Care Family Experience Surveys, or had high positions in the survey's Zone ranking charts.