The LOVE and Care Project

By Maria Miller, Enrollment and Outreach Manager, Saint Francis LIFE, Wilmington, Delaware.

Addressing Community Needs

Saint Francis LIFE is a Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly in Wilmington, Delaware (19801). Based on the philosophy that it is better for the well-bring of seniors to remain living in their own homes in the community, LIFE helps seniors achieve this goal by providing comprehensive and coordinated medical, social and spiritual services and supports. LIFE seniors, who are frail, elderly with multiple medical conditions, have experienced challenging changes throughout their lives, and focusing on maximizing their quality of life can be difficult. They often look for ways to bring meaning and purpose to what they do every day, as well as stay connected as a community.

Solution

For the past two years, Saint Francis LIFE has partnered in an original community outreach effort, called "The Love and Care Project," with the Nemours/Alfred I. DuPont Children's Hospital Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in Wilmington, Delaware. Initiated by LIFE senior Peggy Neil, the Love and Care Project allows LIFE seniors to use their talents in creating gifts of comfort and hope for members of the community.

"I love to lift the spirits of others with encouraging words and actions," said Saint Francis LIFE participant Peggy Neil, creator of the Love and Care Project.

For the first Love and Care Project, LIFE seniors knitted caps and booties for the tiny, vulnerable babies in the NICU. As the seniors enthusiastically created these gifts, they recognized that life is precious at every age. The caps and booties were presented to the babies and families in the NICU during the Christmas season with the hope that they would bring comfort to the fragile newborns and show the families that they care.

"Everybody needs hope and purpose, and this was an opportunity for our participants to give and, at the same time, receive," said Rev. Cheryl Parker, LIFE Spiritual Care Manager. "They know that what they're doing is helping someone else."

For the 2017 Love and Care Project, LIFE seniors crafted "Hearts for Babies," cotton fabric hearts that serve as a sleeping and bonding aid for NICU babies. Hearts like these have been used for more than 15 years to comfort and support hospitalized babies on ventilators, heart monitors and other medical equipment. In times when parents can't be near their child, these hearts can fulfill a baby's need for their parents' presence.

The fabric heart is placed on the bare skin of the mother or father for three or four nights to allow it to absorb body scent. It is then positioned in the baby's bed so that the baby is able to smell the parent's unique scent.

When held or placed near a newborn, the scent is slowly released and soothes the baby. These scented hearts help promote the baby falling asleep more quickly, can reduce the fear of being alone and create a calming environment.

They are widely used in hospitals, especially for premature infants separated from parents right after birth. The hearts even help babies feel safer and more secure when medical procedures are done.

Next Steps

Saint Francis LIFE participants will keep the NICU babies, their parents and families in their thoughts and prayers. The participants who deliver these and future gifts to NICU will share their stories with all LIFE participants so that they can feel the impact of their contribution. LIFE will continue to develop new Love and Care Projects and encourage LIFE seniors to use their talents to help others in need and bond with the community.

Babies with special needs at Saint Francis Healthcare are also supported by the Nemours/Alfred I. DuPont Hospital Children's Hospital.

"We truly appreciate what the seniors have done for the babies and families. We are happy to partner with them and hope they continue to share their gifts with us."

Meg Wuest, BSN, RNC-NIC, NICU Flow Supervisor, NICU Nemours, A.I. duPont Hospital for Children