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## Finding a circle of care

### Hospice offers the seriously ill dignity & love

BY RUTH BASHINKY  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

OBDULIO COLON-ORTIZ has been living with stomach cancer for a year.

His last round of chemotherapy made him so weak that his oncologist gave him two weeks to live and suggested he begin hospice care.

Colon-Ortiz, a native of Puerto Rico, has lived in the U.S. for almost 57 years, but he didn't know what hospice care was and felt conflicted and confused, he said.

"I thought hospice meant that I was being sent to an institution to die. I did not know that hospice was a service I could get at home," said Colon-Ortiz, 75, who lives in Jamaica.

Like Colon-Ortiz, many in the Latino and Asian communities share similar suspicions about hospice care. But a grant from the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation is having some early success dispelling those misgivings.

Hospice Care Network — one of the largest hospice organizations in the state — received a \$195,000 grant earlier this year to educate Asians and Latinos in Queens about hospice care.

Since the grant was implemented, the network has seen a 200% increase in Latino patients and 100% increase in Asian patients compared to a year ago, officials said.

"We haven't met the goals we want to meet as far as the grant, but it is a remarkable increase," said Cynthia Pan, medical director of Hospice Care Network Queens and director of the network's newly established Diversity Institute.

The network has been serving the very ill in Queens, Nassau and Suffolk counties since 1988.

"The biggest barrier to progress is that many people don't know what hospice truly is due to equal parts of language barriers, cultural taboos and the fear of talking about death and dying," said Pan.

Pan has been visiting centers across Queens that serve Latino, Chinese and Korean seniors. The organization recently formed a partnership with the American Cancer Society, which has also been reaching out to the Asian community.

"Our goal is to teach people that providing hospice care for a loved one is a loving gesture, governed by the principle that every person has the right to die in a dignified and nurturing environment, surrounded by those they love," Pan said.



Obdulio Colon-Ortiz (second left) is surrounded by loving family (l. to r.) daughter Mayra Cruz, wife Maria Teresa and granddaughter Rubi Cruz at home where he receives hospice care. Two other grandchildren, Emily and Kevin, are in foreground. Photo by Susana Bates

that every person has the right to die in a dignified and nurturing environment, surrounded by those they love," Pan said.

Since Colon-Ortiz was discharged from the hospital, he has been getting care not only from his wife, but also a nurse, a home health aide, a social worker, a physical therapist and a pastoral care provider.

"Everyone who has come here from Hospice Care Network has been wonder-

ful to me," said Colon-Ortiz.

When James Tsang's 96-year-old mother, Szeeyee Tsang, suffered a stroke last year and the prognosis was not good, Tsang's doctor suggested hospice care.

"I had heard of hospice before, but was concerned [about] how well it worked," said James Tsang, who noted that in the Asian community the common expectation is that the children will take care of their parents.

In Tsang's case, the decision to get hospice care for his mother turned out to be a good move for both of them, he said.

"My mother was able to continue living in the adult residence in Flushing — that is where Hospice Care Network cared for her," Tsang said.

"We were also able to continue using her doctors rather than having her live with me, which would have meant starting all over again, so the continuity was very nice."