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Natalia Collins, the aboriginal community facilitator at CERAH, is joined by Joan Williams, right, from Hospice Northwest, which will help address the hospice volunteer needs of Fort William First Nation.

Building bridges

Editor's Note: This article is the latest in a series related to age research being conducted within Lakehead University's Centre for Education and Research on Aging and Health (CERAH).

BY NATALIA COLLINS
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FORT William First Nation has partnered with researchers based at Lakehead University's Centre for Education and Research on Aging and Health (CERAH) on a project entitled Improving End-of-Life Care in First Nations Communities: Generating a Theory of Change to Guide Program and Policy Development.

The reality is that there is a need for palliative care services in First Nations communities due to an aging population and the high burden of chronic and terminal disease. Through this research project, the goal is to develop a local community-based palliative care program and team to support members who are very sick. This would offer community members the choice of staying in their home communities at end of life as well as receive a more culturally relevant care.

In September 2010, FWFN signed a letter of support and approval to be part of this project. In February 2011, FWFN formed its local Palliative Care Project Advisory Committee to manage the project in the community. Their representatives include a variety of health-care providers, as well as community members and elders.

Through work within the FWFN leadership team, which was created to develop the palliative care program, invitations have been extended to external health-care service providers to create partnerships. Joan Williams, executive director with Hospice Northwest, was invited to join the FWFN leadership team and over the last two years Joan has worked with FWFN to listen to and help address the hospice volunteer needs of the community. Hospice volunteers are dedicated to providing compassionate support to individuals and their families living with a life-limiting illness or those in need of grief and bereavement support. (For further information, go online to www.hospicenorthwest.ca.)

Through her knowledge and expertise, Joan was able to come forward and willingly offer her organization's services. FWFN was thrilled and the two began to work together on

Hospice Northwest and Fort William First Nation team up on end-of-life care project

brainstorming ideas to create the very first FWFN Hospice Volunteer Program. FWFN and Hospice Northwest joined up at the FWFN Annual Health Fair that took place in July and began sharing information with the community about the benefits of a volunteer program and began to recruit potential volunteers.

There was significant interest in the volunteer program and so FWFN and Hospice Northwest decided to hold a community presentation where community members were informed of the possibilities of creating their own, self-driven hospice volunteer program. The presentation included how Hospice Northwest works and what they can offer our community, the roles and responsibilities of a volunteer and how you can become a hospice volunteer. Although the program planning is still in its very early stages, it is moving full steam ahead because there is a lot of interest and need for the services that Hospice Northwest can help us develop for our community.

The partnership with Hospice Northwest is just one of the many new and exciting partnerships being pursued and developed by the FWFN palliative care program leadership team and health-services providers outside of FWFN. Building bridges and collaboration is seen as an important stepping stone to creating, maintaining and sustaining an effective and successful palliative care program in Fort William First Nation.

This project is part of a five-year participatory action research led by Mary Lou Kelley and funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research (2010-2015). For more information, email mkkelley@lakeheadu.ca or visit the research project website at www.eolfn.lakeheadu.ca.

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