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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Nonprofit offers touch, compassion to very sick

[Kathy Robertson](#)

Staff Writer

Jerry Lawler does data processing for the state in his day job, his hands rhythmically tapping computer keys to fine-tune Web pages and post information at the state Department of Social Services.

His other job couldn't be more different. A certified massage therapist, Lawler provides soothing touch to relieve pain and anxiety in patients who are sick and dying.

Lawler is one of 12 therapists who work with [Healing Hands, Healing Hearts](#), a Sacramento nonprofit formed four years ago to offer gentle, compassionate touch to the very sick. The idea -- often new to elderly patients and their care-givers -- is to support and complement traditional medical care, not replace it.

"It's touching, holding, soothing; trying to relax the person and give them a different frame of mind," Lawler said. "When someone is near the end of life, it can be quite awkward. People back off. We come in with no ties or preconceptions. ... My work with Healing Hands, Healing Hearts is totally human, ingrained and connected."

It does more than soothe, too.

Massage therapy significantly reduces cancer patients' symptoms of pain, anxiety, nausea, fatigue and depression, according to a study released last year by staff at the [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#) in New York City.

"We know from our training how pain and anxiety can be reduced," said Valeska Wise, another massage therapist with the program. "It's probably the most rewarding work I've ever done."

Healing touch:

Jo Williams, a former elementary school teacher who founded Healing Hands, Healing Hearts in 2001, didn't plan to be a massage therapist who works with people near death. Then she watched a loved one die.

Williams was introduced to hospice care when her aunt became critically ill with pancreatic cancer. She died in 1999; Williams was her care-giver. Moved by the support both she and her aunt received, Williams joined Compassion in Action, a national nonprofit that trains volunteers to support patients in their last hours.

"Through that work, I realized I wanted to do more than sit and hold a hand," Williams said. "I became interested in touch." She went to massage school and spent \$1,200 in attorney fees to found Healing Hands, Healing Hearts as a nonprofit corporation after she thought over the question "How much do you charge?"

"I realized if a family called, asked -- and decided they could not afford help for a family member who is dying, I wouldn't turn them away," Williams said. Her dream: to make Greater Sacramento the first area in the nation to offer body work to people who are chronically ill or dying regardless of ability to pay.

The organization provides massage, energy work, craniosacral therapy, guided visualization and meditation to three

types of sick and dying patients, in healthcare facilities or their homes. Clients, ages 2 to 92, have serious health conditions such cancer, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or AIDS. Referrals come from local hospices, doctors and others familiar with the program.

'Little miracles':

Cheryl Clark, 55, suffers from a chronic condition that causes hardened skin on the outside, organ degeneration inside and chronic pain. She's been getting massage and craniosacral therapy from Williams in her own home every two weeks for about a year.

Clark's headaches come less often now. Improved circulation has diminished areas of hard, peeled skin. She can get out more -- and do more when she does.

"Things other people take for granted are little miracles for me," Clark said. "I'm feeling better."

Peggy Hughes of Auburn, a cancer patient, hadn't eaten for a month and was very weak when her doctors released her from the hospital two weeks ago into hospice care in her own home, according to Melody Brown, her cousin. Midweek, Hughes had received two massages, was up and about -- and had made a trip to the grocery with Brown.

The touch had to be particularly gentle, Brown said; Hughes is at risk for bleeding.

"It relaxed and comforted her," she said. "And for Peggy, this might be the only thing she has to look forward to. I wish more healthcare providers knew about these things and could offer them to patients."

Donation gap:

Hospice patients are treated free of charge. Critically ill patients receive their first three sessions free of charge, but are asked to pay a below-market fee of \$55 per session if they wish to continue services.

A recently added category of clients, chronically ill individuals, allows the organization to serve patients with long-term problems. Such patients are asked to pay a donation of \$55 per treatment -- or whatever they can pay.

Some people donate \$55. Some don't. Some give far more, but Healing Hands, Healing Hearts struggles on a shoestring budget of about \$10,000 a year, mostly in donations.

"We are not a volunteer organization," said Williams. Therapists get paid as independent contractors. They are skilled professionals with special training that includes hospice care. Most have private practices in addition to the work they do for Healing Hands, Healing Hearts. Williams donates her administrative time.

Insurance billing is a possibility, but there's nobody to do it. Williams is looking for a grant writer willing to donate some time to try to nail down more funding.

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