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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Spokesman-Review
Spokane, Washington
Wednesday Feb. 15, 2017
by Treva Lind
Page 1 of 3

CLOSE FOR COMFORT: Kootenai Health's Cuddle program supports babies in the neonatal intensive care units

Cuddle. Coo. Sing lullabies. Watch the face of a tiny newborn from a rocking chair.

That's the envious job of 10 volunteers in Kootenai Health's Cuddler program. Working in four-hour shifts, Cuddler helpers show up for baby-holding duties wearing color-coded pink scrubs around nursing staff in navy and light blue.

They're trained in comfort and care techniques to interact with babies in the neonatal intensive care unit, mainly for preemies, and support in the birthing center. With far more applicants than slots available, the hospital's snuggle department is fully staffed after the service was recently expanded.

Playing a surrogate grandma comes easily for Cuddler volunteer Gayle Williams, who considers the labor of love as especially crucial for early-term babies. She saw firsthand how touch and talk boosted an infant's development when four of her 10 grandchildren were premature.

"Babies that are born premature need a lot of one-on-one touching and holding," said Williams, 77. "I had grandchildren — a set of triplets and a grandson — born premature, so I understand the need for the attention. They just prosper and grow better with that touch and care."

For babies in her arms at Kootenai Health, she speaks softly to them and sings random melodic songs, like "You Are My Sunshine" or "Rock-a-bye Baby." Or she sing-song talks to them.

"I talk to the babies all the time. I say their name, and I talk to them when I rock them. Even if I can't carry a tune in a bucket, I sing to them. It has to be done quietly, because loud noises startle them. You can hum to them and sing softly."

"It might be, 'You're a beautiful baby, growing up strong,' in a sing-song talking to them."

The Cuddler program started in 2011 to support development and growth of preemies and newborns in hospital care through human voice, touch and interaction. The volunteers also are trained to support full-term babies who are born drug-addicted.

Doctors give the clearance for when fragile newborns can be held regularly by Cuddler volunteers.

"It's comfort, and companionship, and just love," said Williams, who started the post four months ago. "I think they're responding to the warmth and voice, the human touch."

"I enjoy it immensely. It actually benefits me as much as it does the baby."

Retired from the hospital's day care two years ago, Williams had a career both in child care and as a nurse's aide.

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Cuddler volunteers have some child care or nursing experience, said Shannie Davis, Kootenai Health's volunteer services supervisor. One person covered support for a while. Demand for the service grew, though, especially after a newly constructed NICU opened in 2016.

The hospital's NICU has 12 rooms, and the facility on average has seven babies at any given time. While moms can remain in the hospital to be near newborns, some must leave to go home to care for other children or spend a few hours away, Davis said.

"We want to provide interactions with these babies above what our staff does," Davis added. "It really supports growth and development. They just grow faster, all infants do, but especially the premies need it."

After a January Facebook post called for Cuddler volunteers, Davis walked into her office the next day to find about 96 messages from potential applicants.

"It went viral," added Davis, who isn't taking any new Cuddler applications. "Some who called got added, but right now we're fully staffed. Not everyone gets into the program.

"We have a lot of retired RNs. The Cuddlers have to have experience with children and babies. The training process is extensive. It's not just for the NICU; we're also having more volunteers in pediatrics, so they're on either unit."

Davis said most Cuddler volunteers are retired and have flexible schedules. They're required to have a federal fingerprint background check, tuberculosis testing and flu shot, along with the training and hospital orientation. Volunteers wear ID tags. They cancel a shift when sick.

"We do have a couple of them who work full time, and we schedule them on weekends," Davis said.

For Williams, a stint holding one baby can go for nearly four hours straight, or she's needed for more than one preemie.

"Most of the time, I'm in a rocking chair cuddling," she said. "In the NICU, sometimes I'll have one baby here and there depending on what the nurses and doctors need. Sometimes it's one baby for quite a while, sometimes more than one."

"If there's not a need in NICU, then I'll walk over to postpartum and see if they need something done."

Before taking a shift, Williams removes any rings or her watch and goes straight to a hospital sink. "You use a strong soap, and you scrub up, clean your fingernails and make sure your hands are very clean."

Training from a therapist during classes covers the best comfort techniques and soothing methods for newborns, she said, such as using a full hand to hold and keeping them tightly snuggled in blanket so they feel comforted and contained.

"You swaddle them; it keeps them from doing a jerking movement," Williams said. "We're taught how to do the swaddling."

Williams described her work as fulfilling a dream.

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“It’s something I’ve wanted to do since my grandchildren were born premature, and they’re in their 20s now. I have grandchildren from ages 11 to 31. Even if a baby is fussing or crying, it’s a calming thing for me. I forget about other problems and just enjoy.”

Parents appreciate the extra touch, too.

“Every parent I’ve met is totally grateful they have someone there when they can’t be,” she said. “I’ve had two of them grab me and give me a hug. They have other children at home or there are reasons you do have to leave on occasion.”

Williams gets tearful talking about when she’s watched babies get prepared for the trip home after weeks in the hospital.

“There was one baby I had for about four weeks. To watch the baby going from totally quiet and eyes closed, to opening eyes at the end of that time and looking at me wide-eyed, it’s amazing to watch.”

“When you see a baby goes home, I’m very happy. I remember the feeling when my grandchildren went home.”

Providence Health Care offers a similar program, called NICU Nanny, so popular it has a volunteer waiting list at Sacred Heart Medical Center & Children’s Hospital, and for Holy Family Hospital.

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