

Durango Herald

Community Health Action Coalition launches end-of-life education campaign

By [Mary Shinn](#) Herald staff writer

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Parents often talk with their teens about alcohol, drugs and safe sex, but not many ask their children to think about end-of-life health care.

But when Becky Scalf's children turned 18, she asked them about how they would want an accident or illness handled so she could respect their wishes.

"Anybody can have an accident happen. I think planning, preparing makes the situation less stressful," she said.

She also wanted to empower her children to make their own decisions and write them down.

Only about a third of adults in the United States have put their end-of-life wishes in writing, according to a [2013 Pew Research Poll](#).

The [Community Health Action Coalition](#) Durango nonprofit, wants to address this problem by encouraging more people to talk with their families about end-of-life care. The coalition advises people to write their wishes in advance-care directives to avoid conflict and uncertainty at the hospital and among family members, said executive director Pattie Adler.

"Numerous studies have shown that most people, for example, would prefer to die at home. Instead, some of that percentage ends up dying in a facility of some sort when that may not be necessary," she said.

Making sure family members understand your wishes is the key part of this process because they can override written instructions about end-of-life treatment, said Karen Zink, a nurse practitioner and owner of Southwest Women's Health Associates

“We need to talk about death and dying at the dinner table. ... It should be a comfortable topic of conversation for families, somehow we have made it really weird to talk about in our society and culture,” Zink said.

Compared with spending your final days at home, the intensive care unit can be far more traumatic, she said.

Palliative care, like that provided by hospice, can allow people to live longer and be more content at the end of their lives.

Zink has helped 20 people die at home, and it can be beautiful when the family is prepared and the lines of communication are open, she said.

“Death can just be a treasure,” Zink said.

The Community Health Action Coalition’s two-year campaign on end-of-life education was inspired by conversations with Durango health care professionals, at Mercy Regional Medical Center and Axis Health System, who see end-of-life education as a present and growing need.

The nonprofit plans to apply for a Colorado Health Foundation grant in June to fund staff and education. Adler wants to offer education for community clubs and professional groups to ensure doctors, lawyers, life insurance agents and others can guide people through the process.

“This has met with enthusiastic and universal support,” she said.

The coalition also launched a [crowd funding campaign](#) to support education and to help increase how much grant funding it can request.

mshinn@durangoherald.com This story has been updated to correct erroneous links.
