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Inmates help care for sick, dying prisoners

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ROME — Mohawk Correctional Facility inmates Daniel Jenkins and Albert Nieves are part of the state's strategy to meet the health care needs of its aging prison population.

Both men volunteer as palliative aides, spending time with and helping dying and incapacitated inmate patients at the Walsh Regional Medical Unit, a maximum security health facility within the medium-security Mohawk prison.

"I've done a lot of things in my past and I always wanted to help people out," said Jenkins, 30, who is serving five years for criminal possession of a weapon. "I wouldn't want to be in this situation."

The state's five regional medical units offer either hospice or palliative care to their patients.

"From a moral and a kindness issue, the idea of being very sick in a corrections environment, being terminally ill in a corrections environment and dying in a corrections environment has got to be a very difficult situation," said Dr. Carl Koenigsmann, deputy commissioner and chief medical officer of the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. "(It's important) to at least afford that person company and to know that that person is not going to die alone."

Palliative care uses a holistic approach to reduce the symptoms, improve the quality of life of and provide emotional support to patients with serious illnesses and debilitating medical conditions. Hospice is a kind of palliative care that focuses on dying patients who no longer are receiving curative treatment for their terminal illness.

At Walsh, inmates who are chosen to be aides receive 40 hours of training. They are not allowed to provide hands-on care, but they spend time with patients and perform tasks, such as writing letters, that the patients might not be able to do anymore.

Jenkins said he spends his time with the patients talking, studying the Bible, writing letters, playing chess, watching television and making sandwiches and coffee. He spends most of his time with two patients who confide in him, Jenkins said.

Both are dying. One has been granted medical parole, but the other probably will die in prison.

"It will tear me up," Jenkins said.

Nieves, 42, said the experience has been good for him.

"I've been learning more compassion toward people and more caring," said Nieves, who is serving five years for attempted robbery. "I've always been a sentimental person, but now, I'm definitely more in tune with my feelings.

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