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West Virginia among leaders in advance directives

About half of West Virginians have filled out at least one advance directive that helps ensure they will receive the level and kind of treatment they prefer as they near the end of life, according to a recent statewide survey.

The figure in the Mountain State is significantly higher than the national average, which ranges from 18 percent to 36 percent, according to a 2008 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report to Congress. Dr. Alvin Moss, director of the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care, said West Virginia's 49 percent figure is the highest among those states reporting such numbers. New York ranks second at 42 percent, Moss noted.

Survey results also show that those who have heard of the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care are far more likely to have a medical power of attorney or a living will, with 74 percent having at least one. Providing resources related to end-of-life planning is the key mission of the center, which is based at West Virginia University but coordinates such efforts statewide.

[The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources funds the center.](#)

"These documents and others like them are critically important for a number of reasons," Moss said. "First and foremost, it's vital that people receive the treatment they wish during their final months, weeks and days - no more, no less.

"In addition, studies show that many more health care dollars are spent on people in their final days than in the preceding months or even years. Often this money goes toward painful treatments that people would prefer not to have, but their wishes haven't been properly documented and communicated."

According to one study, Medicare payments for the last 60 days of life constitute 52 percent of the payments for the last year of life.

Not surprisingly, the survey shows older residents are more likely to have a living

will or medical power of attorney, with 67 percent of people older than 65 having at least one and 53 percent having both. Just more than a quarter of those 18 to 34 years old have advance directives.

One significant disconnect was evident regarding people's discussions with their physicians. Although nearly 90 percent thought it was important to talk about their end-of-life wishes, just 22 percent have had those conversations with doctors.

In general, people expressed a preference not to be kept alive through extraordinary measures such as machines. Nearly three-quarters said they would rather live a shorter time to avoid suffering, while just 17 percent would prefer to be kept alive as long as possible even if it mean suffering.

The study for the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care was conducted by Jack Canfield LLC in coordination with The Phillips Group in Elkins.

In addition to the advance directives cited in the survey, Moss said a newer program called "Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST)" is gaining ground and should be considered by more people. [It translates patients' end-of-life wishes into medical orders, and research done in West Virginia and elsewhere shows that the forms work even better than advance directives.](#) Since West Virginia introduced its version of the document in 2002, more than 250,000 POST forms have been requested from the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care.

West Virginia is a leader in that department as well, with just nine states having endorsed programs related to orders for end-of-life treatment. The one-page, two-sided form is printed on bright pink paper in West Virginia. It allows patients with serious health conditions and their physicians to check the kinds of treatments they do and do not want to have as their condition worsens.

For more information on any of the advance directives or the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care, visit the website www.wvendoflife.org or call 1-877-209-8086.