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AARP research shows value of End-of-Life program

West Virginia's process for providing care to people near the end of life received praise in a national AARP study, as did a cutting-edge concept for making the patients' wishes easier for health care providers to access quickly.

The West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care coordinates the state's POST (Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment) program, noted as a model in the AARP study. The center, which receives funding through the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, was established in 2002 and for the past decade has developed a national reputation as a leader in the field.

"West Virginia residents are fortunate to have an exceptional POST program to make sure that their treatment wishes are honored," said Gaylene Miller, AARP West Virginia senior state director. "It is important that older West Virginians have meaningful discussions with their doctors and a platform to communicate their wishes to ensure that personal care decisions are honored and protected."

Although states use different names for their programs, the POST concept utilized in West Virginia is among the best nationally. The *Wall Street Journal* last year highlighted the Mountain State's efforts to protect patients' wishes.

AARP's analysis, conducted by the AARP Public Policy Institute and the American Bar Association's Commission on Law and Aging, said such innovative programs give patients suffering from a serious illness a way to make sure they get the care they want – from full treatment to palliative services.

West Virginia and the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care in particular were used as a model in the AARP study.

Dr. Alvin Moss, director of the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care, said the POST form provides outstanding protection for a seriously ill person. The form converts a person's wishes into medical orders that are honored throughout all health care settings.

"Research done in West Virginia shows that a person's wishes as reflected in medical orders on a POST form are respected almost 100 percent of the time," Moss said. "People can decide for themselves how they want to spend their final weeks, days and hours, and they have great resources and a statewide system to ensure that those decisions are respected when the time comes."

In addition to the existing resources, including Living Wills, Medical Powers of Attorney, and Do Not Resuscitate cards, Moss noted that West Virginia hopes to launch its e-Directive Registry later this year as part of the West Virginia Health Information Network. AARP noted that creation of such a system to ensure that POST forms are a visible and accessible part of a patient's electronic health record "needs to occur right now."

"With all of the negative stereotypes about the health of our citizens, it's good to know we're at the forefront on this key issue," Moss noted. "POST forms will be a national norm in the coming years. The West Virginia e-Directive Registry will ensure that a patient's wishes and POST form are available to treating health care providers in an emergency."

Miller encouraged older West Virginians to contact AARP or the Center for End-of-Life Care for more information about advance directives and planning. People can visit the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care's website at www.wvendoflife.org or call 877.209.8086 for information.

For more information on the report "Improving Advanced Illness Care: The Evolution of State POLST Programs" please visit <http://www.aarp.org/health/doctors-hospitals/info-04-2011/polst-04-11.html>