

The Jimmy Carter White House Connection to Hospice & Palliative Care Today

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Jimmy Carter's impact on the hospice movement goes further than his very public decision to be admitted to hospice in February 2023 ... and even further than his administration's decision in 1980 to launch the Hospice Demonstration Project that directly led to congressional passage of the Medicare Hospice Benefit, with strong bipartisan support, in 1981 during the first year of the Reagan Administration.

How much further? You might not be reading *this* daily newsletter if were not for the Carter White House.

If you were a fan of *Hospice News Today*, which I published from 2012 to 2023, and/or if you're a fan of *Hospice & Palliative Care Today*, then you should know that Jimmy Carter (and his long-time senior aides Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan) deserve some of the credit for these two unique daily environmental scans that have served the hospice movement now for more than a dozen years.

It's a long story, but the *Readers Digest* version is that I was a journalism major in the mid-70s at the University of Iowa and a reporter for the student newspaper, *The Daily Iowan*, which was the state's seventh-largest circulation newspaper. Iowa City and surrounding Johnson County were the most reliably Democratic (and liberal) vote in the state, which meant that most of the many candidates seeking the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination found their way to the UI campus.

I began covering that politicking in the fall of 1975 and had the opportunity for long sit-down interviews with several of the candidates—including two 45-minute interviews with then-Governor Carter in November and December. At the conclusion of that December interview (on a Friday night near midnight), Governor Carter turned the tables and started interviewing *me*—what was I studying, what did I hope to be doing in five years, how did I become such a well-backgrounded reporter—and at the end he asked me if I would consider joining his campaign.

And although he was still “Jimmy Who” at the time, I jumped at the opportunity.

The primary campaign found me doing media relations and communications work in the Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey primary campaigns (we won three of those four contests). The general election found me working as a press aide to the Deputy Press Secretary in the national HQ in Atlanta and the post-election transition found me working in Plains as a press aide to Press Secretary Jody Powell.

There were four of us on the campaign who (a) had dropped out of college to join the campaign and (b) were asked to work in the Administration on Day One.

Jody and Hamilton put a caveat on that offer: We had to promise to go back to school and complete our college studies. Which I did thanks to the Journalism program at American University in Washington.

So, Inauguration Day in 1977 found me walking into the Old Executive Office Building as the youngest person on the 369-person staff of The Office of the President.

My job? One of six staffers who produced the daily News Summary for the President and nearly 200 senior officials throughout the White House and the Cabinet and executive agencies.

The White House News Summary was a wonderful education in journalism—reading 20+ newspapers each day, a handful of magazines each week, and tracking the nightly network news with a stopwatch to time stories in one hand and a pen over a legal pad in the other. In newspapers and magazines, we looked for public policy stories (state and national), editorials, and opinion pieces by local columnists that wouldn't be found in national papers like *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. We would write brief summaries (sound familiar?) and provide photocopies of articles requested by any of the recipients. The six-days-a-week package ran about 10-15 pages each day single-spaced (produced in the days of IBM Selectric typewriters, not word processors let alone desktop computers).

Whether by luck or design, environmental scanning was an essential component of every public relations position I had after leaving the White House 45 years ago, which brought me to *Hospice News Today* in 2012.

The changes I've seen in daily journalism since 1977 have been both evolutionary and revolutionary. I've mourned the loss of many a feisty newspaper (anyone fondly recall the *Rocky Mountain News*, *Miami News*, *Chicago Daily News*, or *Cleveland Press*?), stood slack-jawed at the wholesale slashing of reporting staffs, and shook my head in disbelief at the decline of serious reporting at broadcast outlets. But I've also been encouraged by the rise of serious, conscientious reporting at hundreds of web-based, not-for-profit news outlets across the country and the ease with which one can access local news anywhere thanks to the Internet.

While the negatives outweigh the positives over the past 45 years, monitoring the news media is still the best tool available to those interested in staying ahead of the curve in an ever-changing sector like healthcare.

Jimmy Carter, Jody Powell, and Hamilton Jordan now are all gone. I'm grateful to each for the opportunity they gave this long-time news junkie to build a career around his obsession. I believe that the hospice movement is better off for *Hospice News Today* and now *Hospice & Palliative Care Today*. And Jimmy, Jody, and Hamilton deserve their due for that.

On a personal note, I'm also indebted to Jimmy Carter because I met my wife of 38 years (and counting), Sheila Fyfe, when she was working as a recent college graduate on the re-election campaign in 1979 and we had the pleasure of working on the same floor of the Old Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House for several months in 1980.

About the Author

Mark Cohen published *Hospice News Today* from 2012 through 2013. He has been providing strategic communications consulting services to hospice providers and vendors since 2015. He was the first-ever Vice President of Communications at VITAS and served as the chief spokesman for Jackson Memorial Hospital, Miami; The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland; and Wuesthoff Health Systems in Rockledge, Florida. In addition to his work in the Carter White House and the 1976 and 1980 Carter campaigns, he was political director of U.S. Sen. Alan Cranston's longshot bid for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination. He has also worked for a political consulting and public opinion research agency, two trade associations, and in consumer banking.