

Helene and Hospice: “We’re seeing such personal sacrifices. It’s heartwarming and heartbreaking.”

A Zoom conversation for our collective hospice and palliative care community – Oct. 2, 2024



Chris Comeaux – CEO/President, Teleios Collaborative Network (TCN); Hendersonville, NC

Tina Gentry – Chief Administrative and Advancement Officer; Fort Mill, SC



HOSPICE &
PALLIATIVE CARE
TODAY

Cordt Kassner – Owner/Publisher, Hospice & Palliative Care Today; Colorado Springs, CO

Joy Berger – Editor in Chief, Hospice & Palliative Care Today; Louisville, KY

Chris Comeaux: There's great tragedy, great devastation, and there are beautiful miracles occurring at the same time.

I'm in Hendersonville . Tina is in Fort Mill. And so, we're pretty close to Ground Zero, Asheville and the Western North Carolina region with the wideness of the destruction. We have staffing in Greenville, Spartanburg. We have members all the way over past Hickory, NC. So how wide it is--we have team members that live in Tennessee. You know, the mountains' Appalachian Range and the runoff from that on both sides, east and then west have caused things that are just unprecedented. I know I'm going to keep using words like historic, unprecedented, devastating. There are not even words to describe what we're seeing.

Cordt Kassner: Wow. We're trying to just get a sense of this because as we've been monitoring news the last several days, there's really been, you know, the tragedy, but nothing from a hospice perspective and how the hospice providers are doing and patients and staff. The first question that we had for both of you is your family, your friends, your neighborhood, the Teleios staff. How does how does all that look?

Tina Gentry: Yeah. So personally, my family is very blessed. I have family in the low country of South Carolina. I have family that live here in York. And I also have family in east Tennessee. They're all fine. However, there is a level of devastation that we've never seen. It's heartbreaking, but certainly feel blessed that everybody is safe. I have very good friends

in Western North Carolina, and one couldn't get ahold of the other because cell service was out and one was traveling for business. And so that was just heart wrenching. But they were able finally to connect. I think that realizing how blessed we are in and knowing what level of devastation is out there and what other people are experiencing.

It's just heart wrenching. You want to be able to go and fix things and you just can't do it, right? You don't feel like you can do enough. And knowing that there are certain limitations and that we have to rely on other resources to help support our teams. It's something we just have to trust. We have to do what we can and then trust that others will do what they can to help. At the same time, so I know I'm rambling that my family is great, but there there is definitely a level of devastation.

Chris Comeaux: So, all of our all of our staff is accounted for. We do have staff that were impacted; some are still without water, electricity. But I'd say the impact on our staff compared to like Four Seasons [Hospice] staff, CCWNC [Community Care of Western North Carolina], Amorem staff, people have completely lost their homes. They're gone.

We have a wonderful DME partner that serves many of our hospices. His house is the only house left standing in its area. Yesterday, they found the body of their dear neighbor. They can't even get to their house. It would be a 10-mile hike through things that today--in modern days--you would go, "How is that possible?"

That's the type of tragedy, devastation. Some of the places like Asheville, Chimney Rock--because people know about those places--have gotten a lot of press. And you've seen, like, Chimney Rock has literally been wiped off of the face of the map. But there's a lot of kind of forgotten communities. There've been Facebook posts like, hey, these are the areas and again, those areas have been devastated. Astro, Chimney Rock, but they're places like Burnsville, Bernardsville, Boone, Avery, Ash County, Banner Elk. These beautiful little quaint mountain towns that have been literally devastated, and some of them are completely cut off.

We met as a team this morning and were talking about those sorts of things. Personally, my family is ok. At the time, Tina and I were in Washington, DC for an NPHI meeting, so many Hospice leaders were together. We started scrambling Friday. I had a journey, actually slept in a rental car in Greenville, SC, Friday night because the Interstate was horrible.

Some cases, you know, interstates are wiped out. Things you never would think in modern day America. Just getting back to home was an ordeal. Luckily, I got home Saturday morning to my family, and personally we've got a road that's washed out, but that's minor compared to people that have lost their entire homes.

Yesterday we felt like we were getting our legs back from under us. We had Internet back;

cell phone back. We have electricity at our TCN office and then it all went off at 10:00 AM yesterday.

In fact, Amorem's CEO April Moore said out loud--which I think is dead on—"Chris, this feels worse than COVID because in COVID at least we have communication. When you have no ability to communicate, you feel literally helpless. With our modern communication systems, you can't get in touch with each other. It's kind of an interesting kind of MacGyver kind of day, yesterday . We had a beautiful win as a team, but it was really challenging when we had no communication.

I'll tell you about a good story. So, Tina put a request out to her neighborhood. She harvested all these gas cans. Her husband drove them halfway to ... where was it, Tina that met?

Tina Gentry: He drove them to Kings Mountain, so it was about halfway.

Chris Comeaux: Another team member's husband met him in Kings Mountain, drove it all the way to Hendersonville. My son packed all those gas cans into my truck. Four Seasons Board chair, who's also TCN's board chair, owns an oil and gas company. He himself was pumping the gas when we drove up, he filled up all those gas cans and my son drove it up to Yancey County, which again is hugely devastated. And we had no communication. How all that coordination worked out yesterday felt like a minor miracle. Also, a huge learning lesson for us that took a lot of energy and effort.

So, TCN is a virtual organization. We're starting to try to get smart quickly, like being more of an information hub and getting other people deployed. Tina's got a post that we did an e-mail post yesterday. We're gonna do a social media post in a little bit. NPHI did beautiful. All of our members now have a way to give directly to those four programs that I mentioned: Four Seasons, CCWC, Amorem and Carolina Caring.

We're going to do a social media post for that. Tina's team is also working on a way that people say, "What if I want to give water? What if I want to give food?" We're developing a way where people—if you're familiar with an Amazon registry list—where they can actually do that. And hopefully if Amazon's working, some of that stuff could get delivered. The third way that we're working on is just reach out to Tina and me via TCN. We could give you our e-mail addresses.

Chris Comeaux: I've always heard the word, "aftermath." I now understand what people mean by "aftermath." Like the storm is one thing, and the tragedy ... literally, the death toll is going to rise quite a bit, but it's now the aftermath and that there is waxing and waning and crisis by the day. I have a sense that a week from now, two weeks from now, a month from now, two months from now ... this is not going to be, "we'll be back together." No, this

is going to be like years to truly recover from. And so, matching needs **sustained** is going to be a huge challenge as we see going forward.

Cordt Kassner: You have a link that you were talking about to help those four hospices that we could include in the article. Could you drop that in the chat box please?

Tina Gentry: Actually that post is being worked on. He's putting the last link and now and I will send that to you via e-mail. Our graphic designer was just private chatting me a second ago, so he's putting in the final link now.

Cordt Kassner: We found that people will give to the Red Cross because the Red Cross will come in and help globally. But some people will give, you know in different ways to different places. Some want to give directly to a specific hospice to know that it makes a difference. If we can help promote that, we'd love to get the word out.

Chris Comeaux: That's a great point Cordt, because quite frankly I've journeyed that as well. What I'm starting to realize is that some of those organizations--they do wonderful reaching out--but even knowing how to access that? Sometimes getting it directly to the source is actually a great way to make impact. There've been other organizations I've seen that were raising funds, and I'm having that moment of going, "How would we get those funds directly to our Members and connect them with that?" Again, I'm sure those ways are going to develop. So maybe that's going to create more of the tail of how to help, but immediate help is probably best if given directly to those organizations.

Cordt Kassner: What would help right now if someone were to give, how would those funds be ... like, is the bank open to get the funds to? And if you have money to buy water but there's no water to be bought?

Chris Comeaux: Yeah, so water, non-perishables and medical supplies are pretty high on the list, right now. Gas is very precious, but that's obviously got a whole bunch of complexity. That's another cool win. One of our members deployed one of their staff members, stayed away and they're able to secure 192 five-gallon gas cans. That was huge as the gas cans as then the gases bring those resources, but I'd say water, non-perishables and medical supplies. Tina, is there anything you would add to that?

Tina Gentry: Yeah, I would add manual can openers. I know that sounds so silly, but they're hard to come by right now, especially in my area, and I'm sure in other areas as well.

In the weeks that follow, that's when we're really going to need the support. And with the strike that is happening right now, I think we're already starting to see the impacts of the supply chain. We've got to get the stuff secured now because it's only going to get harder to do that, I think, as we move forward into the next weeks.

Cordt Kassner: How are the hospices doing in terms of patient care? I mean, obviously first and foremost is the staff, ok? And you're checking and that's the first wave. The second wave I would suspect would be patient care. How's that going?

Chris Comeaux: Yes, a great question, Cordt. That is priority one--making sure all staff is ok. And then, once you know that, then getting the staff to a location where you can deploy them because some of them need gas, etc. We've seen our members do that. In fact today, CCWNC was trying to kind of meet on the town square for a lot of their staff. That way they could disperse the gas that was delivered and then get them out serving.

Chris Comeaux: Amorem has been doing that. Four Seasons has been doing that now, getting out to their patients. And then you've still got referrals coming in. So, how do you triage? That is something everybody's learning a huge lesson right now. ***There's so much.*** It is triaging. What's the first thing to get to? And you got leaders like, the CEO's who were working with One of the hospice CEO's we talked earlier this morning said, "I got home at 11:00 last night. I'm getting texts by the literally by the second, trying to triage."

I mean, I hate to use this analogy, but it feels like war. And then if your communication systems go down like they did yesterday, that makes it even more challenging.

Starlink has been such a blessing in so many places because when everything else has gone down ... I actually ran to Four Seasons yesterday amidst the gas deployment we were doing. And that's how I actually, finally got on yesterday afternoon. So, whenever I hit Starlink, I got literally 50 texts at the same time and then a huge bolus of emails.

And just kind of triaging, trying to get through challenges ... that's where--God love our leaders right now--pray for them because they are carrying a heavy load.

Tina Gentry: Another story we had, we had one member in particular who had physicians in the Western North Carolina area, specifically in Asheville, which was hit as you all know, very, very hard. They didn't have physician support, and so one of our physicians didn't have electricity or good cell service, but he was willing to relocate to an area that did and because he didn't have those services in order to support them.

We're seeing everybody do everything they can to support our hospice organizations. As you know, nonprofit hospices run really lean anyway, so in times like this it is incredibly difficult for them to be able to provide that patient care because there just aren't as many people who are able to go out and do that because they're trying to take care of their own families and they can't even get out. We're seeing such personal sacrifices from those team members on the ground. It's really heartwarming and heartbreaking all at the same time.

Chris Comeaux: Yeah, that's a key point. And then also to Tina's point, we have the unprecedented wind and the mountains. There's not a road you drive on that does not have like snap telephone poles, lines. The county where I live--God love our first responders and good-hearted local people! They got out with chainsaws and helped. We're blessed. Our offices are downtown Hendersonville. We had office electricity as of two days ago. Now, my home doesn't. But, if you go to some of these mountain regions, I mean they're complete rows that are gone.

You've probably seen national news. There's a guy with 20 mules in Charlotte that literally deployed mules because of some of the search and rescue that's trying to get in some of the hard reach mountain areas.

Cordt Kassner: Yeah. And that's maybe a follow-up question is there are I'm sure people--and I'm thinking radius here right within 100 miles of Asheville--that know the Carolinas, you know that whole area who want to help and who can physically bring in trucks and gas cans and supplies and stuff like that. And then there are the people outside of that 100 miles who within a week or two, maybe want to fly in and help nurses, physicians, social workers, you know, grief/bereavement, whoever—people. But there's got to be a timeline for that, because that may not help today but it would be very helpful in a week or so. And then there are people on the West Coast who are not going to travel, but they can send money. They can send goods like you described, through the Amazon registry kind of a list.

Do you have a sense of a timeline of what would help when, like today we need this and next week we'll need that.

Chris Comeaux: Yeah, I think that's exactly how we're trying to triage. So that's why I was getting this post. This is how you could give directly to those hospices. Second, here's how you can actually get goods ordered to go be delivered to them. #3 like again, Mike, I don't know if I said about Mike Smith from Hospice of Iredell County. Iredell's a good neighbor, they were impacted, but not as much. He brought tons of water and food to Four Seasons on Monday; he showed up first thing. So some of those are a blessing right now. Dave Cook from Hosparus and Bluegrass are putting together right now, water, non-perishables, medical supplies. I think they're trying to make a run here in the next two days or so.

So that type of stuff is like the immediate and urgent. And, I've had wonderful friends in Louisiana who went through Katrina. I talked to Chuck Lee, Sunday. Chuck did a beautiful download from what they went through. And Hurricane Ivan of, here's what it looked like on a day-to-day basis. So that **sustained** help is going to be so important, like my friend Jimmy Holmes in Louisiana said “Look, we'll get a group of guys to come in. You get the homes identified and we'll come in, help clean them up.” There's a lot of, you know, that sort of stuff. But that's like later. Right now, just trying to meet immediate needs, first and

foremost. Those other things are going to become important a month to two months, to six to seven months from now.

Cordt Kassner: Joy and I have talked about the ongoing piece of this, that everybody's concerned today. Is anybody going to care next month and how to kind of calendar this and be looking for and--like this call--instigating if we're not hearing it from other people.

This kind of interview, this kind of a discussion and what would help at that time. Would you both be open to continuing this conversation? You know, in a couple of weeks and then monthly and just sort of that check in?

Chris Comeaux: Yeah, let's do that. Actually, let's just commit that. We're going to do that with each other. We're going to do a monthly check in for as long as this takes to keep it on the forefront. We obviously have our podcast. I've already in the few spare moments asked how can we keep it via our podcast. So, let's partner together on that, Cordt.

I mean, what I've what I've seen is, you know, sometimes you have friendly rivalries in the hospice and palliative care world. That's gone. We're all family right now and that--I just whew--that moves me to tears. That's the type of stuff that's like, you know what? Ok, that gives me hope that we **are** going to get beyond this.

Joy Berger: Beautiful, beautiful and, Tina, if I were to go to Amazon and order a dozen can openers, who can I send them to?

Tina Gentry: I will have that information for you. With that link, we will actually have the addresses that they need to go to. If you use the Wish List, it will be shipped directly to those organizations that need it. ... I'll send you the links.

Joy Berger: Great! We want to get the word out. We didn't want to interrupt you in the thick of the storm, but yes, we want to help! Timing ...

Tina Gentry: Yeah, we're glad that you reached out. Thank you so much.

Cordt Kassner: We have like 5 minutes. What else would you want? What else would you like to share that we can spread the word?

Chris Comeaux: You know, I think we live at a time where because of like movies and technology, you see things on the screen. But what we're seeing with our own eyes is just, it's unbelievable and just, you know, there is some PTSD ready. I mean, you could tell that people aren't quite themselves. Tim and I are ready kind of giving each other permission to kind of go like I am. I'm probably very wired for a crisis situation.

But, just being aware of other people right now, because people are greatly impacted by this. You see surreal moments like when I walk on Main Street, Hendersonville, because all

these people from South Carolina came because they heard we had electricity. So, people are sitting at some restaurants that are open and it looks kind of surreal.

And then, you go a mile away and there's like great destruction. How do we convey that? Again, we don't have the words. But what's most important is what are people's needs and how do we meet those needs and get the resources to the right place? There are great organizations like FEMA and the government that are deploying, but then there are some places that we're still hearing that aren't getting those resources. So we're just trying to be like an air traffic controller, make sure our teams ok, make sure our members are ok.

Chris Comeaux: Tina, what would you add?

Tina Gentry: You know, I think you said that well. I love that we're going to keep in touch because I know Chris and I both lived in places before that have been impacted by hurricanes.

One of the things that I saw in the low country of South Carolina after it was impacted by a hurricane is all that there is all of that immediate help, but then months and months later, there are people who are still sitting with their homes that still don't have walls and electricity--because people came in initially and helped and then left. And you know FEMA's great. Insurance companies are ok, but they tend to come in and do their sweep, and then they leave and these people are forgotten about. And I know that's no one's intention.

Tina Gentry: They're moving on to the next crisis, but we can't allow that to happen in Western, North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and Florida, and the low country and upstate of South Carolina. We've got to make sure that we're doing everything we can to get people the help that they need, for as long as they need.

Chris Comeaux: That's well said, Tina, because there are communities that will never be the same. From this, I mean, it's that type of impact, like, you know, Chimney Rock? How does that ever come back? It literally was wiped off the face of the earth. But Asheville, Asheville is like a major city, a great place people want to visit.

Asheville will be impacted for years, and so it's hard to convey. Like, I was thinking walking through my house this morning. I took for granted, to be able to take a shower quickly and just things are now taking more effort to get to work, to be able to deal with all this stuff. And I know people want to go back to that, but for us it's going to be a while before there's any sense of some of that normal.

Joy Berger: Ok, I've got an awful question to ask. Patient care. People continue to die. People continue to give birth. Communications are cut off, and transportation for deceased persons' bodies to funeral homes. What's happening?

Chris Comeaux: Yeah. They're doing the best they can. I did notice one of our hospices. I know where their census was. There are a lot of deaths, whether that's been from the storm, changes in barometric pressure. I know they're doing everything possible to get to the people that they possibly can. I think that part is being assessed, still.

But I do know I've heard some great stories of, like Tina said. We scrambled and we've gotten physician resources for one of our members because two of their physicians are in communities that can't be accessed. And so, virtual physician support. I know there's great stuff going on to make sure it's there.

What's happening on the ground? Maybe that's something we'll have more stories for you next time, because that's closer to where the action is. We're more of kind of hub central right now.

Joy Berger: Adding to that list, what about pharmacies and people not being able to get medications, DME, oxygen? You know not having electricity and then the backups not being prepared to last for days and weeks on end. So those kinds of things just--we want to raise awareness and help.

Chris Comeaux: Drew [Mihalyo; Dragonfly Health DME & Pharmacy] emailed yesterday. He called all of the CEO's that he works with. They're trying to position additional supplies because of concerns of disruption, you know, to add insult to injury, the whole dock workers strike is something that has us concerned for that supply chain as well. We're trying to best to get medical supplies right now.

Joy Berger: Great!

Chris Comeaux: Because you know most of these hospices are on the East Coast, that would be awful if the supply chain dries up.

[Exchanges of support and farewells ...]