



WHITE PAPER

FOR HOSPICE LEADERS

The Hidden Communication Tax in Hospice

How reducing everyday friction creates more capacity for the work that matters most

By Katherine Wells
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Hospice is extraordinarily human work.

In the pages that follow you'll find a simple framework for spotting hidden communication friction, a way to estimate what it costs, and a 30-minute audit your team can run this week.

Every day hospice care teams coordinate around patients and families. They manage symptoms, answer difficult questions, support families, coordinate care, respond and reassure.

Hospice teams do remarkable work.

Much of that work greatly depends on information moving between people. Not because anyone is doing something wrong.

Because caring for people is complicated.

communication tax *(n.)*

The unnecessary friction that forces valuable people to spend extra time and effort making sure everyone has what they need.

Three phone calls to confirm one medication change. The same update repeated to four family members.

It doesn't appear on a P&L. It is absorbed into payroll, interruptions, follow-up, mental load and small acts by people making sure nothing falls through the cracks.

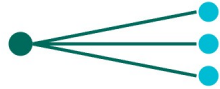
The question isn't "What are our people doing wrong?" It's "What could we make easier for them?"

Four Places to Look for Opportunities to Give Time Back



CHASE

Someone tracks down information that should already be at their fingertips, making three calls just to confirm one order.



REPEAT

Someone shares the same update over and over, copying and pasting it or placing five separate phone calls.



RELAY

Someone becomes the go-between. A nurse tells an aide, who tells the son, who has questions, and the message changes with each handoff.



DISCOVER LATE

Important information arrives too late to prevent a problem that could have been avoided.

Each of these behaviors reflects dedicated people compensating for gaps in the systems around them.





— 1. CENSUS

Make Every Referral Opportunity Easier to Move Forward

Referral generation and what happens between referral and admission are different problems. A hospice can do excellent business development work and still have a path from referral to admission that is harder than it needs to be.

Follow a few recent referrals. Look at the handoffs, follow-ups, time spent finding information and moments when someone had to wait. Ask what people had to do to keep a demanding process moving.

1 in 5

Medicare hospice patients receive four days of hospice care or less, by CMS's estimate. When time is that short, every hour between referral and admission matters.

SOURCE CMS, Hospice Monitoring Report (2024), FY 2019–2023 data

Where could we make the journey from referral to admission easier for everyone involved?

Give Great People More Time for the Work That Needs Them

Hospice teams are full of people whose time is precious.

25%

Annual turnover among hospice RNs in 2025. For hospice CNAs, it was 29%.

SOURCE 2025–2026 Hospice Salary & Benefits Report, Hospital & Healthcare Compensation Service with the National Alliance for Care at Home and LeadingAge

Turnover has many causes. Friction around the work is one that leaders can actually change. Giving time back to the people doing the work is part of keeping them.

Some communication is the work, like sitting with a family, listening, coordinating care, reassuring someone and preparing a family for what comes next.

Often other work exists only because information isn't where it needs to be, like tracking down routine information, repeating the same update, checking whether something happened, relaying information and searching for context.

- **CUSTOMER EXAMPLE** *Dignity Hospice recovered about five hours per staff member per week after reducing this kind of communication friction.*

The goal is more time for the communication that matters.

What could we take off our team's plate without taking anything away from patients or families?



Find the Expense That Isn't on the P&L

There's no line item on a hospice P&L called "chasing information." But you're paying for it.

Small amounts of invisible labor accumulate. An extra call here, a follow-up there, a few minutes finding context, another check to make sure something happened. Behind each one is someone who cares.

Better systems make it easier for people to accomplish what they're already working hard to do.

A simple way to make the cost visible is to use your own numbers.

Employees	×	Hours	×	52	=	Annual hours
employees		conservative avoidable communication hours per week		weeks		annual hours

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE ONLY FTE equivalents assume 2,080 working hours per full-time employee per year

100 employees × 2 hours per week × 52 = 10,400 hours per year. At five hours per week, that becomes 26,000 hours.



If unnecessary communication work had its own line on our P&L, what would we learn?

Reduce the Mental Load

Referral partners value responsiveness. What they value even more is confidence, knowing what is happening without having to keep the case on a mental checklist.

☐ Was the family reached?

☐ Is admission scheduled?

☐ Is the nurse coming?

☐ Does the family know?

☐ Was the issue handled?

☐ Do I need to follow up?

The better experience is simpler.

☒ I know what's happening.

☒ I know it's being handled.

☒ I know the family knows.

☒ I can turn my attention elsewhere.



“I don’t have to chase them.”

Responsiveness is good. Never having to wonder is better.

- **CUSTOMER EXAMPLE** *MorseLife Hospice grew its census fivefold after becoming the easiest hospice to work with in its referral network.*

Business development opens the relationship. The experience of working together helps determine who gets the next referral.

When someone refers a patient to us, what could we take off their plate?



82%

National average top-box score on the CAHPS Hospice “Communication with family” measure.

1 in 2

hospice family caregivers report unmet information needs. Those who don't live with the patient rate hospice communication less favorably.

— 5. FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Make Invisible Care Visible

Imagine a daughter who lives 1,000 miles away.

She doesn't see the nurse notice a subtle change. She doesn't see the aide spend extra time making her mother comfortable, the social worker help with something that has been worrying her, or the chaplain sit quietly when that is what she needs.

That changes when updates start to reach her. A short note after a visit. A photo now and then. A question from the team about her mother's preferences. **Small moments like these build trust and let her see the care her mother is receiving.**

Communication makes care visible to the people who aren't there to see it.

Care can be extraordinary. Communication helps families see, understand and experience it.

- **CUSTOMER EXAMPLE** *Family Hospice Care credits improved family communication as the key driver of its CAHPS rating rising from 3 to 4 stars.*

Hospice teams are already communicating constantly. What's needed is a way for more of the care they're providing to reach the people who love the patient, without creating another task for the people providing that care.

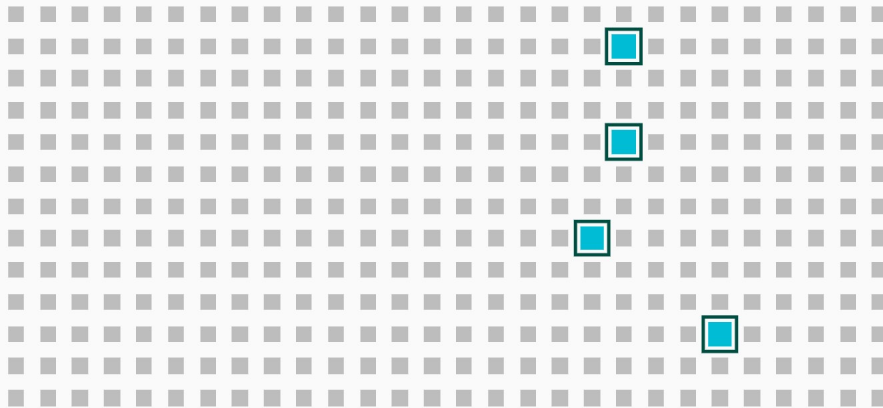
If I lived 1,000 miles away, how much of the extraordinary care our team provides would I know was happening?

SOURCES CMS Care Compare, CAHPS Hospice Survey national average, accessed October 2026; Starr LT, et al., “Close but Not Close Enough: How Distance Caregiving is Associated with Hospice Family Caregiver Hospice Communication Experiences,” *Health Communication* (2023), citing prior research.

See What Matters

Hospice leaders oversee a huge number of interactions. The challenge is knowing what deserves attention.

Relationship visibility goes beyond any chart, report or dashboard. No leader can personally see every interaction.



Leaders can start by recognizing exceptions. What is changing? What remains unresolved? Where might someone need support? What deserves attention?

The same visibility that helps leaders support their teams also supports quality reporting and survey readiness. When exceptions surface early, they can be addressed before they become findings.

Real visibility means seeing what matters soon enough to help.

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How can we make it easier for leaders to know where their attention can make the greatest difference?

Don't Automate the Friction

A better question than “Where can we use AI?”
is “What could we make easier for people?”

If an employee manually moves information from one place to another, automation can make that faster. But the better answer is eliminating the need. If a manager reads dozens of messages to find what matters, summarizing helps. Surfacing the few that deserve attention helps more. If the same routine question is repeated, the information should reach the person before they need to ask.

Start with the people and the work. The right solution depends on the problem. It might be a better workflow, an integration, automation, clearer ownership, AI or some combination.

Whatever role AI plays, patient information has to stay protected. Protected health information should never be used to train AI models, and any tool that touches it must meet HIPAA requirements, including a business associate agreement.

**Don't automate
the friction.
Remove it.**

AI is useful for summarizing, organizing,
identifying patterns, recognizing change and
surfacing exceptions.

SUMMARIZING

ORGANIZING

IDENTIFYING PATTERNS

RECOGNIZING CHANGE

SURFACING EXCEPTIONS

Humans are good at presence, judgment,
empathy, trust, reassurance and connection.

presence

judgment

empathy

trust

reassurance

connection

**The most valuable role for AI in hospice is creating
more room for the things humans do best.**

**Are we using technology to add more
capability, or to give people more capacity?**



The Communication Tax

CHASES

Someone CHASES because they care enough to track down what they or others need.

REPEATS

Someone REPEATS because several people deserve to know.

RELAYS

Someone RELAYS because they want to make sure information reaches the right person.

DISCOVERS LATE

A leader DISCOVERS LATE because it is impossible to see every interaction.

Each one is a sign of how hard dedicated people are working to make their organizations work.

The tax is absorbed into time, interruptions, mental load, extra effort and countless acts of follow-through. The first step is finding the extra work surrounding the human work and asking, "Could we make this easier?"

A 30-Minute Communication Friction Audit

WORKSHEET

Take one recent patient journey from referral to admission to ongoing care.

Start by asking, “What did our people have to do to make this work?”

Patient journey _____ Reviewed by _____ Date _____

CHASE

Where did someone have to track down information that should have been at their fingertips?

LOOK FOR Intake waiting on physician orders or a signed election statement. A nurse confirming a DME delivery. On-call staff searching for the plan of care.

RELAY

Where did a message pass through several people, and did it change along the way?

LOOK FOR A family's question that reached the nurse secondhand. An aide passing a concern to the nurse. Intake updating a hospital case manager on an admission.

REPEAT

Where did the same important update have to reach several people separately?

LOOK FOR One change in condition called to the son, the daughter and the facility nurse separately. The same message copied and pasted into several texts.

DISCOVER LATE

Where would knowing sooner have prevented a problem?

LOOK FOR A family unsure when the nurse would arrive. A symptom change that waited for the IDG meeting. A referral source who learned of a death secondhand.

Some patterns will be necessary. Others will reveal a chance to simplify a workflow, connect information, improve visibility or give time back. The purpose is to support the people doing the work.

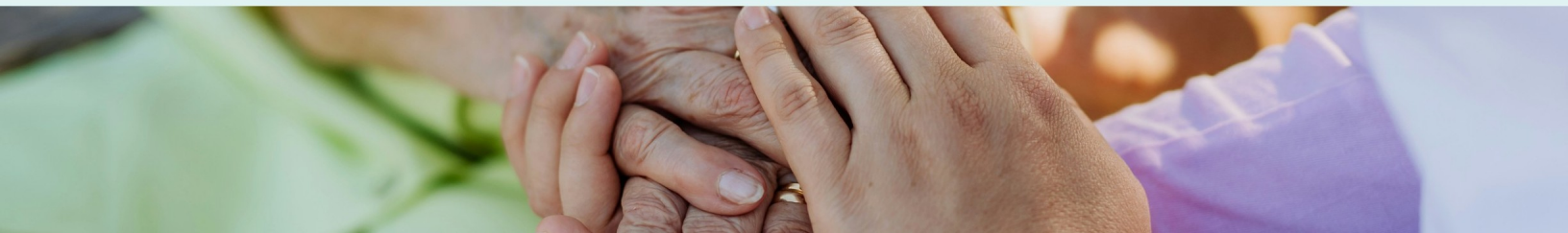
Several examples mirror questions families answer on the CAHPS Hospice Survey, such as whether the hospice team kept them informed about when they would arrive and about their family member's condition.

How Much Communication Friction Exists in Your Hospice?

The Hospice Communication Score is an 8-question self-assessment across Referral Experience, Family Experience, Staff Efficiency and Leadership Visibility & Risk. It takes about two minutes.

Use it to identify where communication is already working well and where things could be easier.

serenitysmart.com/hospice-communication-score



Making More Room for Hospice

Technology has a role. Better systems connect information. Better workflows eliminate unnecessary steps. AI helps identify what deserves attention.

But none of those things is the point.

The point is what they give back.

Time for a nurse to sit with a patient.

Time for a social worker to listen.

Time for an aide to notice the small things.

Time for a chaplain to be present.

Time for a leader to support people doing difficult work.

Time for a family to feel connected and informed.

Hospice organizations already do exceptional work under demanding conditions.

The path forward is clearing away more of what gets in the way of the work that matters most.

Serenity Smart works with hospice organizations, including MorseLife Hospice, Family Hospice Care and Dignity Hospice, to reduce friction for the people providing and receiving care through better communication and connected workflows.

Customer examples reflect the experiences of individual organizations and are not benchmarks or claims of causation.

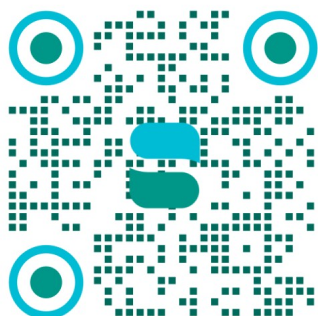


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Katherine Wells is passionate about making care easier to coordinate for the people who provide it and the families who depend on it. For five years she co-hosted the *Mavericks of Senior Living* podcast, interviewing leaders across aging services, which gave her a unique inside view of what's working and what can be improved across the care industry. Her own experience coordinating care for her aging parents across dozens of providers made the cost of communication friction personal. Today she brings more than 27 years of enterprise software experience to the problem as CEO of Serenity Smart, an integrated, HIPAA-compliant platform that connects care teams, families and partners.



YOUR NEXT STEP

Take the Hospice Communication Score.

Eight questions. About two minutes. Scan the code to begin.

serenitysmart.com/hospice-communication-score

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