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Lisa Lesnicki, left, community relations co-ordinator for the Carpenter Hospice in Burlington, Ont., in operation since 2002, and Sandy Johnson, executive director of Hospice of Greater Saint John, have been sharing information on the operations of their organizations.

Ontario facility the dream local hospice aiming for Palliative care \$1-million capital campaign will be launched Saturday at Valentine Gala

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SAINT JOHN - For most people there is no place quite like home.

And the same holds true for the dying, and their families, says the executive director of a residential hospice in Burlington, Ont., that has served more than 800 families of end-of-life palliative care residents since Aug. 6, 2002.

"When you want to die at home, it's the next best option - it feels like home," Sandra Street said in a telephone interview.

"When someone is seriously ill, in the last days, the hospital setting is not family friendly, especially when kids are involved," she added.

"We have had a lot of young parents die in the Carpenter Hospice, with children, and the children can come and stay overnight, if they want, or all day. It's a very home-like setting, so kids can stay in a room or watch TV or stay in the room with their parents."

More than 200 volunteers help the staff, which includes an on-duty RN at all times, provide residents with "the best of care, the highest level of care possible," said Street. "The care options for a person who is ill is better in a residential hospice than they are in any other setting."

Residents have private, homey rooms with en suite baths - and, best of all, it all comes at no cost to families.

Street said all that to let Saint Johners know that Carpenter House is simply the fulfilment of what can be expected here when Hospice of Greater Saint John makes good on establishing Atlantic Canada's first residential hospice at Bobby's Hope House, a former teaching convent it has acquired on Dufferin Row on the west side of the city.

Carpenter House has recently twinned with Hospice Saint John, offering its expertise on things to do and not to do in bringing a residential hospice to fruition in Saint John. In return, the local hospice's board is sharing its 25 years of expertise in offering outreach programs to the community - something Carpenter House is now adding to its services.

Like Carpenter House, Bobby's Hope House will be a 10-bed facility. But unlike its Ontario counterpart, executive director Sandy Johnson said the Port City hospice is still working on raising the capital funds needed to get the doors open, awaiting a long-term cost-sharing commitment from the province and raising enough funds up front to match that contribution during the first year of operation.

Yet, Johnson has high hopes all those things could be accomplished within the year.

She credits the excitement generated by the project and the appearance of CTV Atlantic news anchor Steve Murphy, as guest speaker, for having to move the annual Hospice Valentine Gala from the Delta Brunswick hotel to the Saint John Trade and Convention Centre.

Johnson said a highlight of the gala, a dinner and dance slated for Saturday at 6 p.m., will include the launch of a \$1-million capital campaign to cover the \$800,000 costs of renovations needed to ensure the Dufferin Row building meets all fire and building code requirements, equipment and supplies.

"We're quite excited because we have been working with a number of foundations and we've had quite an outpouring of support already," said Johnson. "We'll be announcing at the gala where exactly our (campaign) is at.

"We're moving forward," she added. "We have hired an architect and have building design plans done, and we're going to tender this spring. The renovations could begin as early as this summer."

Hospice is asking government to fund \$200 a day per per patient, with Hospice providing an additional \$100 co-pay.

The average length of stay in a residential hospice is three weeks.

Both Johnson and her board secretary, Tina Landry of Bayshore, a company involved with hospices across the country, took advantage of the twinning arrangement with Carpenter House on the weekend.

They went to Burlington to visit the Carpenter House and to attend a Hollywood Night-themed gala that annually raises \$350,000 toward its \$1.6-million operational budget (including \$580,000 from the Ontario Ministry of Health).

Landry was still riding "a high" from visiting her first operational residential hospice when she returned home Sunday.

"It was life-changing for me," she said. "It totally validated everything we're trying to accomplish here. By seeing the residential hospice up and running, and see the families there, it was like seeing the end of the dream."