



# 25 Years of Progress

## *ELNEC and AACN Transforming Palliative Nursing Education*

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In the year 2000, leaders with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing joined with Dr. Betty Ferrell and her colleagues at City of Hope to address gaps in how nurses are educated to care for patients at the end-of-life and their families. The collaborators launched a far-reaching train-the-trainer initiative, the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium (ELNEC), which resulted in competencies, guidelines, and nursing curricula developed to prepare nurses to provide evidence-based, skilled, and compassionate palliative care. The 25th anniversary of ELNEC celebrates the tremendous efforts of the stakeholders in academia and practice, who share a commitment to transforming nursing education and elevating health care across settings. To date, more than 1.7 million nurses have been educated with the ELNEC curriculum, and more than 1200 undergraduate and 440 graduate schools of nursing offer ELNEC training in palliative end-of-life care. The remarkable academic-practice partnership at the heart of ELNEC has dramatically changed nursing care for patients with serious illnesses and their families in the United States and globally.

### KEY WORDS

nursing competencies, nursing education, palliative care curriculum, palliative care education

In 2025, the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium (ELNEC) celebrates 25 years of advancing innovation and excellence in palliative and end-of-life (EOL) care.<sup>1</sup> The need for the ELNEC project emerged from an understanding that “nurses cannot practice what they do not know.” Existing curricula circa 2000 for educating nurses and other clinicians to provide hospice and palliative care largely failed to prepare clinicians to meet the complex needs of patients with serious illness. To address this gap, Dr. Betty Ferrell, Director of Nursing Research and Education at City of Hope Medical Center in Duarte, California, had the vision and leadership to engage the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) in a collaborative initiative that would transform palliative nursing education.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to highlight this unique academic-practice partnership that has helped to reinvent nursing education and elevate patient care.

At its inception, leaders with the City of Hope (COH), under the direction of Dr. Ferrell, recognized that partnering with AACN was essential to mobilizing faculty and schools of nursing to improve palliative nursing education. AACN has been the leading voice of academic nursing in the United States since 1969.<sup>2</sup> AACN drives innovation in nursing curriculum, responsible for establishing educational standards for nursing programs at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral levels. The collaboration between COH and AACN to advance palliative nursing education has fueled the success of the ELNEC project through the present day.

### ELNEC’S HISTORY

The idea of the ELNEC project was sparked after an assessment of the state of palliative nursing education, which began in the 1990s. Nursing research identified a significant gap. Only 2% of all nursing school curricula and textbooks included critical aspects of hospice and palliative care nursing education (ie, pain and symptom management, loss and grief, care at the end-of-life, and communication).<sup>3</sup> With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, ELNEC and AACN convened a roundtable in Washington, DC, with leading

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health care professionals, including practicing nurses, educators, and health care ethicists, to develop scholarly guidelines around compassionate nursing care. This meeting resulted in the development of the AACN document, *Peaceful Death: Recommended Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for End-of-Life Nursing Care* (Table 1), which outlined 15 competencies to be incorporated into nursing curricula in baccalaureate or entry-level nursing programs.<sup>4</sup> Instead of creating courses or electives specific to palliative and EOL care, the authors provided suggestions to nurse faculty and administrators (ie, Deans, Associate Deans, Program Directors, Chief Nursing Officers, and Department Chairs) regarding how to integrate these competencies into existing courses and clinicals within the nursing curricula for all students. Suggestions for courses where these competencies could be threaded included Health Assessment, Pharmacology, Psychiatric Mental Health, Nursing Management Courses, Ethical/Legal Content,

Cultural Issues, Nursing Research, and Professional Issues/Health Care Settings.<sup>4</sup>

## NURSING EDUCATION

With few textbooks and resources focused on palliative and EOL nursing care, nursing educators had limited access to teaching materials to ensure their students could meet the competencies outlined in the *Peaceful Death* document.<sup>3</sup> To provide resources and faculty training, AACN and COH developed a 3-day, in-person program with the primary goal of educating practicing nurses, continuing education providers, staff development educators, and undergraduate nursing faculty to teach or practice palliative care. In 2000, with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the ELNEC project began a 3-year initiative to offer a 3-day, 8 module ELNEC CORE train-the-trainer course to

**TABLE 1** ELNEC Milestones

Year	Foundational Event or Document	Description and Significance
1999	<i>Peaceful Death: Recommended Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for End-of-Life Nursing Care</i> published	Developed with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, this AACN document highlighted the lack of nursing preparation in end-of-life care and proposed key curricular recommendations.
2000	End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium (ELNEC) established	A joint initiative by AACN and City of Hope, ELNEC was launched in response to the need for improved palliative and hospice care education in nursing curricula. Between 2000 and 2016, the development of ELNEC materials and courses occurred.
2016	CARES: Competencies and Recommendations for Educating Undergraduate Nursing Students	Defined 17 core competencies for integrating palliative care into undergraduate (prelicensure) nursing education, addressing a critical gap in curriculum and preparation.
2018	G-CARES: Graduate-Level Competencies	Built upon the CARES framework to guide palliative care education in graduate (postlicensure) nursing programs, introducing 13 competencies aligned with advanced practice.
2020	One Million Nurses Trained	On November 6, 2020, ELNEC announced that more than 1 million nurses and other professionals have been trained using the ELNEC curriculum.
2021	<i>The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education</i>	Delineates competency expectations for graduates of baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral (DNP) programs in nursing. Moves nursing education to a competency-based framework and calls for clinical learning experiences in 4 spheres of care, including hospice/palliative/supportive care.
2022	CARES and G-CARES: Second Edition	Revised versions of the 2016 and 2018 competencies. The number of competencies was reduced to 15 (entry-level) and 12 (advanced-level) to streamline and better align palliative and hospice care education with contemporary practice needs.

Abbreviations: AACN, American Association of Colleges of Nursing; ELNEC, End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium; DNP, Doctor of Nursing Practice.



undergraduate nursing faculty (Table 2).<sup>5</sup> Faculty attending ELNEC courses received the necessary education and tools to be able to return to their schools of nursing and teach their students to provide palliative care across the lifespan.<sup>6</sup> The evidence-based tools included PowerPoint slides with faculty talking points, case studies, and interactive activities to engage learners, which were based on current evidence. Faculty were encouraged to copy and utilize these tools, giving them the resources needed to meet the AACN Peaceful Death competencies. Additional later funding allowed for a similar series of ELNEC CORE courses geared for graduate faculty.

To raise the visibility of ELNEC's goals and resources, AACN began hosting information about this project on its website and in member communications. ELNEC was prominently displayed so faculty could learn more about the courses as well as the importance of teaching this content. This collaborative effort gave ELNEC the credibility that schools of nursing were seeking and the expertise needed to guide curricular change.

## ELNEC'S GROWTH

As awareness of ELNEC training grew, practicing nurses across diverse settings expressed a desire to learn this content. ELNEC train-the-trainer programs quickly expanded their outreach to practicing nurses, continuing education coordinators, administrators, and researchers in addition to faculty

in schools of nursing. The ELNEC project is based on the belief that all nurses across settings of care need to know the principles of primary palliative care. The ELNEC project preceded, but aligns with, the essential domains of The National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care for best practices in primary and specialty palliative care.<sup>7</sup>

Participants in the ELNEC CORE train-the-trainer courses also recognized a need for content addressing the needs of specific populations as well as a higher level of knowledge and competency for advanced practice nursing (Table 3). Since the original ELNEC CORE curriculum was released, 7 additional ELNEC curricula have been developed, including critical care, geriatrics, and pediatrics. Additionally, ELNEC for Veterans was developed for nurses to learn about unique palliative and EOL care for this distinct population. Originally funded by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, ELNEC for Veterans is currently offered through the National Alliance for Care at Home.

Nurses attending ELNEC courses include the primary providers of palliative care or "palliative care generalists" as well as nurses who work exclusively in hospices or on palliative care teams who are considered the palliative care specialists. Primary palliative care clinicians do not specialize in palliative care but are responsible for the delivery of basic elements, such as symptom management, advance care planning, or goal setting. Specialty palliative care clinicians are also most often certified in hospice and palliative care through the Hospice and Palliative Credentialing Center.<sup>8-10</sup>

**TABLE 2** ELNEC CORE Curriculum

Module #	Module Name	Content Description
1	Palliative nursing	Foundational aspects of palliative care unique to the role nurses play in this specialty.
2	Pain management	Critical aspects of pain assessment and management are described, along with multidimensional approaches of pain care (eg, pharmacologic, mental health professionals, etc)
3	Symptom management	Overview of symptoms that are common in patients, separated by body system.
4	Ethics in palliative nursing	Discussion of the common ethical issues that arise in nursing practice and how they can be addressed.
5	Cultural and spiritual considerations in serious illness	Knowledge about the importance of culture and spirituality in end-of-life care and the multiple factors that can impact this life stage (eg, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc).
6	Communication	Consideration of various manners of communication, including nonverbal and verbal language.
7	Loss, grief, and bereavement	Summary of the different ways loss impacts patients, families, and nurses, and ways to practice self-care to manage grief.
8	Final hours	Various considerations in the final days, hours, and minutes of patients' lives and provision of nursing care.

Abbreviation: ELNEC, End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium.

**TABLE 3** ELNEC Specialized Courses Curricula

Specialized Course Name	Description
ELNEC Interprofessional Communication	This interprofessional program focuses on the teaching and application of communication principles.
ELNEC Pediatric	Knowledge for nurses to deliver developmentally appropriate care to perinatal, neonatal, children, and adolescent populations.
ELNEC Geriatric	Content focuses on the care nurses provide to the aging population, with consideration of physiological changes and different settings in which the care is received (eg, assisted living, skilled nursing, etc)
ELNEC Advanced Practice Registered Nurses	This course provides advanced training in pain assessment and management with 2 tracks—adult and pediatric care.
ELNEC Oncology Advanced Practice Registered Nurses	Prepares advance practice nurses to provide general palliative care to those with cancer in the adult and pediatric oncology settings.
ELNEC-Undergraduate/New Graduate curriculum	Incorporating the 15 competencies from CARES, this program is designed to prepare baccalaureate nursing students and new nurses to provide care to those with serious illness.
ELNEC-Graduate	Incorporating the 12 competencies from G-CARES, this program is designed to prepare master's and doctoral nursing students for providing care to those with serious illness.

Abbreviations: ELNEC, End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium.

To make the content available to all nurses seeking this education but unable to attend a course, online ELNEC curricula are available through Relias Academy, including ELNEC CORE, Pediatrics, and Geriatrics courses. Nurses receive continuing education credits and a certificate of training for their professional portfolios upon successful completion of an online course, just as they do in a live course. All ELNEC curricula undergo continuous quality improvement and updates with new data and evidence-based practices, so the ELNEC modules reflect the current data nurses need to know.

To support and further disseminate the efforts to provide access to palliative care across the globe, the ELNEC Connections newsletter was launched. This quarterly electronic newsletter is disseminated to all trainers and others requesting the content. ELNEC Connections showcases the latest training opportunities, teaching resources, trainer outcomes, and related information.

## COMPETENCIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATING UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS (CARES) AND G-CARES

Nearly 20 years after the original Peaceful Death document was completed in 1999, the ELNEC team recognized the need to reassess how schools of nursing were integrating ELNEC courses into their curricula.<sup>3,11</sup> After surveying faculty and textbook content, it was clear that gaps still exist

in undergraduate and graduate palliative care nursing education, which needed to be updated using the latest evidence. With grant funding from the Cambia Foundation, the ELNEC team reconvened a second summit with faculty and palliative care experts to revise AACN's Peaceful Death Document. The new *Competencies and Recommendations for Educating Undergraduate Nursing Students*, called *CARES*, was expanded to include 17 competencies for entry-level programs.<sup>12–14</sup> The graduate curriculum was updated in 2019, resulting in the publication of *G-CARES*, which is comprised of 13 competencies to prepare advanced practice nursing students to provide primary palliative care in any setting. A graduate-level curriculum (ELNEC-Graduate) also was created for students in master's and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) programs to reflect the new *G-CARES* competencies.<sup>1</sup>

## Extending ELNEC

ELNEC has thrived with support from foundations, starting with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in the 1990s, and continues to thrive with funding from the Cambia Health Foundation, a philanthropic arm of the Cambia Health Solutions, with one of their goals being to improve "Healthy and Connected Aging." In 2024, Cambia helped fund an undergraduate faculty workshop, Implementing the AACN *Essentials* Domain of Palliative Care in Undergraduate Education, which focused on educating nursing faculty in the AACN *Essentials* and *CARES* competencies.<sup>15</sup> The program was extremely successful, with 111 participants attending from 84 schools of nursing across 38 states. The demand for



this learning compelled Cambia to provide additional funding to expand the workshop to both undergraduate and graduate faculty in 2025. Invited speakers to these workshops, titled Faculty Development and Leadership in Palliative Workshop: For Undergraduate and Graduate Faculty, included the AACN *Essentials* coaches and experts in health care education and palliative/EOL care.

AACN and the ELNEC team also recognize that quality palliative nursing education should incorporate clinical experiences as well as classroom teaching. Collaborative arrangements between academic and practice partnerships are based on common goals, mutual respect, and shared knowledge.<sup>16,17</sup> Hospice and palliative care settings can provide excellent clinical opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students seeking skills essential for caring for patients with serious illness and their families in any setting. With the challenges facing faculty in securing clinical sites for student learning, hospice and palliative care settings can expand student experiences beyond acute care.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, hospice and palliative care settings are a great source for graduate nursing research when there is collaboration between faculty and administrators.<sup>18</sup>

### THE AACN ESSENTIALS AND ELNEC

First issued in 1986, the AACN *Essentials* outlines competency expectations for students completing undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. Over the decades, this guiding document has evolved as practice expectations have changed at both the entry and advanced levels. Used by accrediting organizations to ensure that nursing programs meet professional standards, the *Essentials* has been instrumental in shaping the preparation of nurses by schools across the United States and internationally.

In 2021, AACN released *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* and, for the first time, called for clinical learning experiences focused on hospice and palliative care. The latest *Essentials* delineate 10 domains for nursing practice and 45 competencies expected of graduates from baccalaureate, master's, and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs. Four spheres of care are also identified in which nursing students must be prepared to provide care to patients across the lifespan and in different health care settings. The spheres of care include (1) Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, (2) Chronic Disease Care, (3) Regenerative or Restorative Care, and (4) Hospice, Palliative, and Supportive Care.<sup>19</sup> Graduates of nursing programs are expected to have the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes commensurate with their scope of practice, to provide culturally competent care and education to an increasingly diverse patient population.

To align with the 2021 AACN *Essentials*, the *CARES* and *G-CARES* competencies were revised in 2022, resulting in the publication of *Primary Palliative Care Competencies for Undergraduate and Graduate Nursing Students*.<sup>20</sup> Endorsed by the AACN Board of Directors, the second edition of

these competency guidelines facilitates the integration of palliative care education across all levels of nursing practice. Most recently, the ELNEC team revised the online ELNEC-Undergraduate and ELNEC-Graduate modules to correspond to the revised *CARES* and *G-CARES* documents.

To assist nurse educators in using the content featured in the *Essentials*, *CARES*, and *G-CARES*, the ELNEC team has added a Faculty Corner on the ELNEC website. This comprehensive resource provides teaching tools, free webinars, and other materials that support the implementation of the palliative care competencies. The site also provides a platform to connect with Regional Support Chairs for faculty seeking additional guidance.

### CONCLUSION

The 25th anniversary of ELNEC is being celebrated this year to recognize the tremendous efforts of nurse educators, practicing nurses, health care system leaders, researchers, and policymakers to move nursing to the frontlines of providing care throughout the journey of serious illness and EOL.<sup>20</sup> Without these advocates from both academia and practice, the consortium would not have been possible or continued to thrive in the United States and internationally.

ELNEC's success is evident through its broad national and international reach. With the support of AACN and the COH, legions of ELNEC trainers have hosted workshops to share the ELNEC content in all 50 United States and its territories. The ELNEC curriculum has been translated into 13 languages, and training have been held in 116 countries around the world. To date, more than 1200 undergraduate/entry-level programs and 440 graduate/advanced-level programs within schools of nursing have accessed the online ELNEC-Undergraduate/New Graduate and ELNEC-Graduate curricula.<sup>1,2</sup> Since ELNEC's inception in 2000, more than 1.7 million nurses and other health care providers have been educated with ELNEC courses and are applying their new skillsets to countless patients, family members, and health care systems in the United States and globally.

ELNEC thrives via a shared commitment among leaders in academia and practice to improving the workforce readiness of nurses entering practice and the provision of evidence-based EOL care. Together ELNEC collaborators have developed practice competencies, curricula, and resources to help faculty change how nurses are educated and how they practice. Partnerships between schools of nursing and palliative care clinical settings will continue to expand as a result of ELNEC's advocacy, which include being intentional about offering clinical rotations in hospices and on palliative care units and featuring hospice and palliative care nurses as lecturers and student/staff mentors.

AACN and the COH have sparked a groundbreaking movement to improve nursing education that has had a global impact. These partners work tirelessly with stakeholders,





including philanthropies, to ensure the availability of resources (eg, curriculum, funding, and networking) to support nursing faculty engaged in palliative care education. By investing in nursing faculty and the preparation of future nurses, ELNEC has made great advances in improving care for patients and their families facing serious illness and the EOL. This work will continue as ELNEC trainers inspire new generations of nurses and other health care providers.

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