



# The Massachusetts Model

## *A Roadmap for Advancing Serious Illness Care in Nursing Education*

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The Massachusetts Nursing Task Force was established to promote the integration of primary palliative nursing competencies in nursing education across the state. A statewide survey revealed that only 23% of baccalaureate nursing programs felt their students were well-prepared in this area. Moreover, there was limited

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integration of evidence-based resources due to curriculum constraints, lack of faculty time, and financial limitations. To address these challenges, the Massachusetts Nursing Task Force implemented a 2-pronged approach: an End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium train-the-trainer workshop for faculty and the development of a free, peer-reviewed online nursing resource library aligned with national competencies. The resource library, launched in 2023 and grounded in Kolcaba's Holistic Theory of Comfort, offers diverse materials to facilitate the incorporation of palliative nursing education into existing curricula. Future goals include wider dissemination of these resources, improved assessment of palliative nursing in curricula and practice settings, and expansion of this initiative beyond the state level to advance palliative nursing knowledge and practice.

### KEY WORDS

baccalaureate, critical illness, educational resources, faculty, nursing, nursing education, palliative care

**T**he Massachusetts Nursing Task Force (MNTF) was initially convened by the Massachusetts Coalition for Serious Illness Care (MCSIC) to assess and assist in the delivery of high-quality nursing education and the integration of national primary palliative competencies, education, and standards within schools/colleges of nursing across the state.<sup>1</sup> Composed of faculty from several schools/colleges of nursing along with palliative nurse experts from community and acute care, the MNTF committed itself to the unique and vital role of advocating for nurses to provide excellent care for people with serious illness through education and training that reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion of patients, families, and nurses.

Beginning in 2021, the MNTF began by endorsing the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Competencies and Recommendations for Educating Nursing Students (CARES) and Competencies and Recommendations for Educating Graduate Nursing Students (G-CARES), supporting primary palliative nursing at both the baccalaureate



and graduate levels.<sup>2-5</sup> In subsequent years, the MNTF has been a convener bringing nursing experts in palliative care from across the state to implement best practices in nursing education. This process included meeting with community organizations, nursing-related associations, nurses practicing in a range of settings (eg, outpatient, acute, and postacute), and schools/colleges of nursing offering associate, baccalaureate, and graduate-level degrees.

A statewide survey conducted by the MNTF of baccalaureate nursing programs found that only 23% of schools/colleges felt their students were well-prepared in palliative nursing or the care of patients with serious illness.<sup>1</sup> Only 5 of the 21 nursing programs integrated the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium (ELNEC) curricula created for undergraduate schools of nursing. In the analysis of open-ended comments, schools/colleges noted the challenge of little room to integrate primary palliative nursing into the curriculum. Moreover, nursing programs welcomed the collaboration and leadership of the MNTF to promote awareness, resources, and messaging on this important topic that is often overlooked.

## CONVENING COLLABORATORS AND THE MNTF RESPONSE

*The Essentials: Core Competencies of Professional Nursing Education (The Essentials)* outline the necessary curriculum content and expected competencies of undergraduate and graduate nursing programs.<sup>6</sup> The 2021 update explicitly includes hospice/palliative/support care as one of the 4 spheres of care. The AACN CARES and G-CARES were updated in 2022 by a national group of nursing faculty and palliative care nursing experts who combined the original competency documents to reflect the format of *The Essentials*.<sup>4</sup> Given the overwhelming consensus from schools/colleges of nursing regarding difficulty integrating primary palliative care nursing competencies into curricula, the MNTF convened webinars with collaborators to learn what support and resources would be helpful. While program representatives agreed there was a need to include the competencies, they also acknowledged there were limited resources allowing them to do so. They identified 3 main resource constraints:

1. Faculty lack the time to create or find teaching resources around primary palliative nursing.
2. Curricula are filled with content that is highly tested on the National Council Licensure Examination, so there is little room to squeeze in new content.
3. Financial resources are limited to pay for per-student subscriptions to available learning modules, including resources like the ELNEC Core curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with the realities of these constraints, the MNTF identified the need to provide access to free or low-cost teaching resources. In addition, faculty reported a need for guidance to thread primary palliative nursing throughout the curriculum in an iterative process aimed at incrementally

developing the level of competency as students progressed through programs. The MNTF implemented a 2-pronged approach to address these needs: empowering clinical and teaching faculty through an ELNEC train-the-trainer session and developing a nursing resource library to provide faculty with ready-made teaching resources to incorporate into existing courses.

## ELNEC TRAIN-THE-TRAINER WORKSHOP

In 2022, the MNTF sought to strengthen serious illness care education and training by inviting clinical and teaching faculty from Massachusetts graduate and undergraduate nursing schools for a 2-day virtual ELNEC Core Curriculum Train-the-Trainer session.<sup>7,8</sup> This provided an opportunity to learn how to effectively teach and integrate primary palliative nursing knowledge and skills to care for individuals with serious illness through applying the ELNEC curriculum. This workshop offered content application to clinical practice and effective teaching strategies with focus on introducing palliative care principles, communication, pain and symptom management, death care, and loss, grief, and bereavement. This training sought to address a gap in knowledge and address the shared mission that all nurses need primary palliative nursing education and skills when encountering individuals who will benefit from a palliative care approach, including those with serious illness (adults and children) across care settings (hospitals, schools, nursing homes, clinics, long-term care, residential homes, shelters, group homes, prisons, etc.).<sup>1-4</sup> Funded by the MCSIC, discounted tuition rates were provided for this training that included 14 hours of continuing education. Materials provided to trainees included the *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Nursing* (5th Edition)<sup>9</sup> and a digital copy of over 1500 pages of valuable ELNEC palliative care resources. Twenty-seven participants engaged in the training taught by 5 MNTF ELNEC-trained experts in palliative nursing from both academic and clinical practice settings.

## INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE: PRAXIS TOOLS FROM THE NURSING TASKFORCE

Guiding our next steps, the resource development process aligned with Kolcaba's *Holistic Theory of Comfort*,<sup>10</sup> which describes the concept of comfort as a fundamental need of all human beings for relief, ease, or transcendence that may be the outcome of stressful healthcare situations. The stressors experienced by patients with serious illnesses, their families/caregivers, and care providers require nurses to prioritize these individuals' physical, emotional, and spiritual needs so that they may achieve relief, ease, or transcendence from days, weeks, and even years of providing care.<sup>11</sup>



In 2023, [Paré JJ], a member of the MNTF, created a theoretical framework that offers a theory-driven foundation for our educational praxis.<sup>11</sup> This theory-driven framework grew out of the MNTF's mission to "strengthen nurses' abilities and confidence to provide high-quality, inclusive, and equitable care for all people living with serious illness in Massachusetts regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, or ability." As [Paré JJ] describes, "the basic assumption of the theory of holistic comfort can provide a foundation for ongoing dialogue between members of the MCSIC working group as the resources shared grow and reach a wider audience." A goal in the development of the resource library website was to address the concept of comfort for the patients' families/caregivers and nurses who are caring for persons living with serious illnesses.

### ESTABLISHING THE MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR SERIOUS ILLNESS NURSING RESOURCE LIBRARY

In further advancing the call to integrate primary palliative nursing education, the MNTF assembled a workgroup in 2022 to identify and review the resources for faculty to incorporate into teaching materials. This workgroup engaged 6 nurse educators, researchers, and specialists in palliative and end-of-life care from across the state. The primary goal, over 6 months, was to develop a digital resource library of curated materials to address the identified gap in nursing education on topics consistent with the CARES and G-CARES. Resources that existed and could be accessed by the public were gathered and reviewed by the team. These resources included articles, case studies, videos, infographics, toolkits, and simulation exercises.

Individual workgroup members submitted resources by providing an abstract description of the resource background and objectives. These resources were vetted through a review process by the committee that included a scoring and ranking system that then became the basis for inclusion or exclusion of the resource into the database based on a final vote from the committee (Supplemental Digital Content 1, <https://links.lww.com/JHPN/A121>). Resources were primarily evaluated using the Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose framework.<sup>12</sup>

The website was funded through the MCSIC. In February 2023, the website (<https://www.maseriouscare.org/what-we-do/collaborative-partnerships/nursing-task-force/nursing-resources>) and digital collection were made available online.<sup>13</sup> An initial free webinar entitled *Nursing Resources for Teaching Serious Illness Care* was open to the public but targeted to nursing faculty across Massachusetts. In addition to a live demo and walkthrough of how to navigate the resources, the MNTF members shared examples of how these resources could be incorporated into existing curricula. The website can be searched by key palliative care topic area or filtered by topic

alphabetically. Each resource page contains a description of the resource provided along with *The Essentials* domains addressed, the format, the intended audience, cost, tips and suggestions for use of the resource, the citation, and a link to access the resource. To date, the website has a collection of 34 resources, including articles, videos, case studies, and more.

### RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Many of the resources included in the digital collection have been used by the nurse educators from the MNTF in their teaching practice and clinically. For example, Death Over Dinner<sup>14</sup> (Figure) is a resource that has been applied to clinical teaching by several of the nurse educators. As an interactive website, it asks the user a series of questions to develop a customized plan to select from, including guides, videos, and readings, to facilitate thoughtful conversations about the end-of-life over dinner with friends and family. There is also a Healthcare Professionals edition. This resource addresses *The Essentials*' domains of communication and compassionate care. The format is a free interactive website and is suitable for learners at all levels of nursing education. Additionally, there is guidance suggesting assigning readings and videos to students prior to class in preparation for breakout group discussions, and if possible, including a potluck dinner.

### FUTURE GOALS, ACTIVITIES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING

While collaboration and progress have been made across the areas of nursing education outlined earlier, the MNTF sees significant ongoing steps needed to advance palliative nursing knowledge and clinical practice. Advancing the competencies among nurses to enter practice with generalist palliative nursing knowledge and capacity remains a significant call to action that the MNTF is prepared to continue.

There are 3 primary areas for next steps:

1. disseminating educational resources to advance the integration of palliative care across curricula in part, based on *The Essentials*,
2. improving assessment of serious illness care in the nursing curricula, and
3. moving beyond the state level as a call to action among faculty and clinical nurses.

First, our goal is to support faculty to maintain ongoing nursing education resources, sustain the nursing resources library, and share innovations in teaching across nursing education, curricula, and programs. Currently, the working group plans to sustain the website while also finding ways to keep information updated and maintain open access to these resources for educators engaged in advancing palliative nursing. Disseminating resources through the MCSIC and across states through college of nursing networks in a strategic approach requires ongoing investments.



# Death Over Dinner



**Description:** Interactive website which asks the user a series of questions in order to develop a customized plan, including guides, videos and readings, to facilitate thoughtful conversations about the end of life over dinner with friends and family. There is also a Healthcare Professionals edition.

**AACN Domains:** Communication; Compassionate Care

**Format:** Website

**Audience:** Associates Level; Baccalaureate Level; Graduate Level; Practicing Nurses

**Cost:** Free

**Tips and Suggestions:** Assign readings and videos from the website to students prior to class then use class time to breakout into groups of 6-8 learners for a Death Over Dinner conversation (if setting and policy allows: make it a potluck!).

**Citation:** Death Over Dinner. <https://deathoverdinner.org/>. Accessed May 5, 2025.

**FIGURE.** Resource spotlight: Death Over Dinner.

Second, as *The Essentials* requires palliative care competency, it becomes important to advance and share existing low-cost/no-cost evidence-based resources such as the ELNEC Core curriculum, ELNEC Undergraduate/New Graduate Curriculum, and ELNEC Graduate Curriculum for use in schools of nursing as fundamental curricular content. An additional resource, *Integrating the AACN Hospice/Palliative Sphere in Undergraduate Nursing Education: A Practical Guide for Faculty*, provides additional established resources to support this focus.<sup>15</sup> Diligent expansion of educational resources from the associate-level through the graduate-level is also needed. After completing the undergraduate survey,<sup>1</sup> the MNTF wants to better understand how serious illness care is integrated into associate degree nursing curricula at the prelicensure level. Finally, we aim to collaborate with national groups focused on the call to action among faculty and practicing nurses to enhance the primary palliative care education preparation.

## CONCLUSION

We recognize the significant accomplishments palliative care nursing leaders have made nationally and globally and our ongoing commitment to strengthen palliative nursing practice. The contributions of the MNTF aim to improve the

nursing care of persons with serious illness through educating nurses and nursing students in practice and academic settings. Our team has built upon the work of many national efforts advancing palliative nursing, including those resources available through the AACN/ELNEC Faculty Corner<sup>16</sup> that provide a footprint of the work done to understand the needs of nursing faculty in integrating the core competencies related to palliative nursing on the baccalaureate and graduate levels. To improve clinical practice in nursing palliative care, the MNTF aimed to enhance education and training resources into nursing curricula and to make this accessible across levels of nursing education and clinical practice experiences. Our collaboration and outreach in Massachusetts serve as a model for implementing evidence-based practices and leveraging the expertise of palliative nurses that support clinical practice across a wide array of settings and levels of nursing education.

Recognizing the need of nursing faculty, nursing staff educators, and practitioners at all levels to have an array of resources that are readily available and low cost, our team committed to working together to identify, review, and make available materials for faculty use across academic and clinical settings. With leadership from the MNTF, our models, within the broader MCSIC's efforts, serve as an exemplar for working collaboratively to instill palliative nursing knowledge and



education in organizations across Massachusetts. We look forward to enhancing this work to strengthen palliative nursing education together nationally and collectively.

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