

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: events@floridahospices.org

FHPCA ANNOUNCES 2026 AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE WINNERS

Tallahassee, FL. – Florida Hospice & Palliative Care Association (FHPCA) announced the 2026 winners of the annual Awards of Excellence in Hospice and Palliative Care last week, in conjunction with the 2026 Annual Forum held at the Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld. The Awards of Excellence program was created to identify, recognize and showcase the outstanding and innovative work of individual staff members, teams and hospice programs throughout the state of Florida.

“Each of this year’s honorees reflects the heart, innovation and dedication that define hospice and palliative care in Florida,” said Paul A. Ledford, President & CEO of FHPCA. “Their work brings comfort, dignity and compassion to patients and families during life’s most meaningful moments, and it is our privilege to recognize them.”

The 2026 Awards of Excellence recipients are:

Hospice Story Award

VITAS Healthcare, Broward County

VITAS Healthcare was honored for a three-minute video following a mother and daughter through their hospice experience. The film transforms one family's story into a powerful reflection of what compassionate end-of-life care truly means.

Rising Leader Award

Christina Alltop, Haven Hospice

Christina's journey at Haven is an example of what can happen when passion, initiative and compassion come together. She has risen from a Team Assistant answering phones to a Patient Care Representative, becoming a trusted resource for patients, families and care partners, approaching every conversation with warmth, empathy and a genuine focus on what is best for the patient.

Excellence in Program Innovation: Community Outreach

Kristy Skonieczny, Community Hospice & Palliative Care

Kristy created Community Mail Call, a simple idea that has become a deeply meaningful, community-wide expression of gratitude. Since its launch in June 2025, more than 10,000 handwritten letters and cards have been collected, giving veteran patients a personal reminder that their service is remembered and appreciated.

Excellence in Program Innovation: Community Outreach

Volunteer Services, Empath Health

Empath Health's Doula Program, launched in 2021, created a specialized volunteer role focused on presence, active listening, legacy work, and helping patients and families plan for and navigate their final days.

Excellence in Program Innovation: Clinical Practice

Dementia Care Program, Haven Hospice

Recognizing the need for effective, one-on-one dementia care and community education throughout the north central Florida service area, Haven Hospice developed a comprehensive Dementia Care Program designed to improve quality of life, support caregivers, and help families create meaningful moments together.

Synergy Award

Field Nurse Change Council, Hospice of Health First

This award-winning team demonstrates the power of listening to frontline voices, bringing nurses and clinical leaders together to identify challenges, share ideas and create practical solutions. From streamlining DME orders and admission guidelines to improving communication, technology and cross-training, their efforts have strengthened collaboration across the organization.

Excellence in Interdisciplinary Practice

Deangelis “Dee” Brandon, Empath Suncoast Hospice

What sets Dee apart are the deeply personal moments she creates for patients, who light up when she visits. Facility partners and colleagues consistently describe her as a true gift. After nearly 30 years of service, Dee continues to elevate everyone around her through empathy, collaboration and unwavering dedication to hospice.

Catalyst Award

Albert “Bert” Goodsell, VITAS Healthcare

Bert is someone colleagues know they can turn to for guidance, and he consistently looks for ways to support managers, leaders and fellow clinicians. His willingness to teach, collaborate and step in wherever needed strengthens teams and ultimately improves care for patients and families.

Catalyst Award

Eugene Banks, Gulfside Healthcare Services

Whether preparing for hurricanes, responding to emerging health threats, or streamlining safety processes, Gene brings people together around a shared goal of protecting patients, families and one another. His leadership has strengthened readiness, improved efficiency, and fostered a culture of respect, inclusion and accountability.

Barbara Janosko Excellence in Leadership Award

McKinsey S. Kemp, Community Hospice & Palliative Care / Community PēdsCare®

McKinsey exemplifies visionary leadership, innovation and compassion in pediatric hospice and palliative care. She has developed innovative education for healthcare professionals, including programs focused on trauma-informed care and grief and loss, helping families navigate emotional and practical challenges.

Hospice Heart Award

Natalie Villabrera-Williams, VITAS Healthcare

Natalie embodies the heart of hospice through the compassion, calm and connection she brings to every patient and family. She sees the person behind the diagnosis and finds meaningful ways to honor what matters most to them.

About the Annual Forum

FHPCA thanks the Forum Planning Committee, speakers, exhibitors and sponsors who helped make the 2026 Annual Forum a success. Those interested in serving on the 2027 Annual Forum Planning Committee may contact events@floridahospices.org.

About Florida Hospice & Palliative Care Association

Florida Hospice & Palliative Care Association (FHPCA) supports and advances hospice and palliative care throughout the state, advocating for high-quality, compassionate end-of-life care for all Floridians.

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