Volunteer Alexandria Zielinski of Jackson smiles at 9-week-old Shristi Mainali of Wauwatosa as she demonstrates what she does as a volunteer cuddler Thursday at St. Joseph's Hospital in the town of Polk.

Helping hands

Volunteer cuddlers leave a positive impact on infants

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Sally Gorman remembers the first day of her assignment.

Gorman, a retired registered nurse at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin in Wauwatosa, returned as a volunteer to give back to her community. She worked in clinics throughout the hospital when she learned of another opportunity she could not pass up.

She described the moment she received the notice. The feeling of excitement when she read the email and learned of the opening.

It's a simple assignment. There is no fanfare she would receive recognition for. It is one task — hold an infant for an extended period of time — and Gorman jumped at the chance.

She has a routine. Thursdays she travels to the hospital, generally not more than 30 minutes (depending on the traffic), and reports to the neonatal intensive care unit on two separate floors of the hospital. She walks from one area to the next, asking the nursing staff if any children need care.

If the answer is no, she moves on to another area until she is told there is an infant for her. Gorman devotes two hours of her attention to a single baby until she has to leave.

Gorman is a cuddler. Hospitals throughout the country established similar programs, including Froedtert & Medical College of Wisconsin, where volunteers hold infants when their parents or medical staff are unable to.

Alexandria Zielinski is another volunteer cuddler at St. Joseph's Hospital — part of Froedtert — in the town of Polk. A colleague introduced her to the program, and she went through the training and signed up for an available time.

"Babies need to be held and loved and talked to, and held kind of tight sometimes and snuggled up. I love being able to do that. I enjoy being a help."

— Sally Gorman
Volunteer cuddler
Holding and carrying an infant is a fun activity, but St. Joseph’s staff have identified that interaction as an identifiable medical need. There is evidence suggesting close contact is important.

“We know that when babies are not held, they have troubling growing and trouble with their social and emotional development,” said Anna Hankins, St. Joseph’s Health Center pediatrician.

Judy Cameron, a professor with the University of Pittsburgh, said an infant has all the neurons the person has at adulthood, and as the brain develops, connections between brain cells develop. Some grow strongly, and some less so, depending on the person’s experience.

A child that is held or touched frequently will develop connections in areas of the brain it needs for healthy living.

“If those areas get used a lot, then strong brain pathways for understanding social interactions, understanding empathy, understanding facial expressions, will develop and the child will have that for the rest of their life,” Cameron said. “They will be good at understanding other people’s feelings and emotions.”

To understand what can happen to those deprived of adult interaction, she referenced a book, “Romania’s Abandoned Children,” by Charles Nelson that pointed to cases where children are cared for in orphanages in countries, where locations housed hundreds of infants with few caregivers. They were fed and had their basic needs met, but lacked interaction with adults. They were fed and not spoken to. During playtime at the orphanage, adults gathered several children in the room and watched as they handled their toys, but didn’t intermingle.

Researchers found large cognitive and motor deficits in these children compared to those who were touched and handled.

Examples don’t have to be extreme for observers to understand the impact it has.

“I can do better,” Hankins said. “When there are babies with low blood sugar, there are clear studies that show that being held skin to skin with an adult regulates their blood sugar. When babies have trouble with temperature control, being held skin to skin regulates their temperature. I have had numerous experiences when a baby has had trouble breathing, and is breathing too fast and is distressed.

“If we can get them skin to skin with Mom, that will settle down (the baby).”

It is in that spirit St. Joseph’s decided to implement a cuddler program, said the center’s birth center manager Maria Jostad.

The program began last year. Hospital staff have opened the program to any parent who wants their child in it. It is typically reserved for those who must remain for an extended period of time, such as those born prematurely.

To be part of the cuddler program, volunteers are given additional training, on top of the normal preparation they receive.

“The training is usually two hours,” Jostad said. “We will go through what the expectations are and how to hold the baby.”

Parents must give written and verbal consent, and hospital volunteers are contacted to ask for their availability for the three-hour sessions. Volunteer demographics range — some, like Zielinski, are college students, but others are grandparents who devote their time.

“Basically, we just hold the babies,” Zielinski said. “We hold them. We talk with them. We can sing to them sometimes. Sometimes, just talking with the baby makes it happier. Some babies like to be rocked. We basically just try to make the baby happy.”

For Gorman, it is an important part of what it means for an infant to grow up.

“Babies need to be held and loved and talked to, and held kind of tight sometimes and snuggled up,” Gorman said. “I love being able to do that. I enjoy being a help. I know it is a help to the nursing staff and I know it is a help to the baby.”

Volunteers provide a medical advantage, but the interaction involves a pair of individuals who mutually benefit from the contact. Volunteers described moments of calm, joy even, at the privilege of watching infants in their arms.

“In science, you can find out what happens, if this then that,” Hankins said. “If you are asking why humans need to be touched and held, that is not something we know scientifically. That just gets down to the basis of what it means to be human.”

Volunteer Alexandria Zielinski of Jackson shakes the hand of Shobha Mainali of Wauwatosa, before holding Mainali’s 9-week-old daughter Shristi Thursday at St. Joseph’s Hospital in the town of Polk.

A warming tank for blankets used by cuddler volunteers to swaddle babies seen Thursday morning at St. Joseph’s Hospital.