



Hospice Owner Fights Rising Medicare Debts

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(CBS) Registered nurse Bobbie Flemming drives about 1,000 miles a week around the Mississippi Delta, making dozens of house calls.

But Fleming, a hospice owner, is not out to save lives. Her goal is to help her terminally ill patients die in peace, by offering, as she says, "Just a small amount of comfort and compassion on this end-of-life journey."

But there's a problem: 11 years ago, Congress mandated that terminally-ill patients are entitled to unlimited hospice care - but Medicare only pays the hospices for six months' worth, **CBS News correspondent Thalia Assuras** reports.

So when the federal government realizes its been paying for people like throat cancer patient Willie Ross for well over six months, Medicare demands its money back - plus 12 percent interest.

Flemming's current bills show she owes more than \$3 million.

She says whatever funds she has go to purchasing drugs, buying medical equipment and paying staff salaries. And she has no intention of denying her patients treatment.

"I'm not the one to say because you're not dead, I'm just going to dump you," said Flemming. "It's not in me to say that."

Medicare declined to comment to **CBS News**, citing a lawsuit on the issue. But it has offered Flemming a choice - either pay up or declare bankruptcy.

"I've always done the right thing about end-of-life care," said Flemming. "I'm going to continue to do it and someone is going to eventually hear this."

Flemming recently took her case to Capitol Hill with other hospice owners, asking Congress to freeze their debts until it can come up with a way to pay for extended hospice care.

Until then, Flemming said she's not going to play God by turning away patients just because they don't die on schedule.

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