



Retired Adults Volunteer as Baby Cuddlers

Both the infants and the volunteers reap health benefits

By [Kim Mueller](#)

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Bob McElwain folded his 6-foot frame onto a rocking chair and patiently waited as the crying baby settled against his chest. She wasn't happy. She was sick. But the 77-year-old Kansas City, Mo., man set about to soothe her.



Bob McElwain of Kansas City, Mo., soothes fussy babies at St. Luke's Health System. *Credit: Courtesy of Saint Luke's Health System*

"So what do you think the stock market is going to do today?" McElwain asked the premature infant at Saint Luke's Hospital. The hospital volunteer didn't wait for an answer. McElwain just kept talking about the Dow Jones index, football or President Trump.

"The baby isn't listening to what I say. And I'm used to that," the former financial manager said, chuckling. "I just chatter and put her head on my chest so she can feel my voice and hear my heart beat. That human contact makes all the difference."

The swaddled baby cried. And whimpered. Then quickly went to sleep in the arms of her "Cuddler."

The Baby Cuddler Concept

Baby cuddlers are hospital volunteers extensively trained in Neonatal Intensive Care Units across the country. Some hospitals call them Rockers or Huggers. But all hospitals with them require these specialized volunteers to attend specific NICU training beyond the traditional orientation classes as well as commit to working a three-hour shift each week for at least six months.

Cuddlers provide therapeutic talk and touch — they don't feed the babies, change their diapers or walk around with them, said Lynne Thomson, NICU nurse manager at Saint Luke's. They simply hold the infants and read, talk or sing to them when the families can't be at the hospital because of work, school or other child care commitments.

The nurse's job is to monitor vital signs, Thomson said. The baby cuddler's job is to help the infants developmentally mature so they can go home to their families as soon as possible.

"There are some parents who long to be with their babies, but can't be here," Thomson explained. "So it gives them peace of mind to know that someone is going to be holding their baby. It feels good to know you have a village."

Volunteers Benefit, Too

The health benefits of volunteering have been well [documented](#). Older adults who volunteer may be able to delay, or even reverse, declining [brain function](#). Volunteering may decrease depression risk factors, increase self-confidence, reduce stress levels and release dopamine in the brain.

Volunteering also produces "the happiness effect," [according to researchers](#) at the London School of Economics. They found that the more people volunteered, the happier they were.

McElwain has been volunteering for two decades. "If I wasn't doing this, what would I do?" he asked. "I'm healthy. I play tennis, but I can't do that every day of the week. *That would kill me.*"

McElwain starts his Thursdays early in the morning, clocking in several miles as he walks to four adult Intensive Care Units. As a patient advocate, he listens to adult patients' family members share their concerns and dreams for their loved ones who usually are unconscious. Then he makes his last stop of the day at the NICU, where he spends three hours cuddling fussy babies. Although he has four grandsons, McElwain seems to adopt each child placed his arms at Saint Luke's Hospital.

"I finish up here doing what I like to do," he said with a smile. "ICUs are not easy. But this is the best. This is a very peaceful place."

A Coveted Position

Cuddler programs also are a very popular place. Less than six months after asking for 50 volunteers to rock babies in its 19-bed NICU, Truman Medical Center in Kansas City encouraged volunteers to apply to other departments because its TMC Rockers program did not have any vacancies.

Baby cuddlers need not apply at Miller Children's & Women's Hospital in Long Beach, Calif. The hospital stopped taking applications after its wait list grew to five years, said Cayla Wahl, marketing representative for the hospital's 95-bed NICU.

"It's a popular program," she said. "We have 54 Cuddlers, and we would like to accept more volunteers because it is so awesome."

Hospitals usually require applicants to be at least 18 years old, although NICU volunteers are much older. At Saint Luke's Hospital, more than 80 percent of the 28 baby cuddlers are retired.

"I like mature volunteers," Thomson said. "They come with life experience. They stay calm. They are very mindful. And people who really want to do it — who really are committed, who have that passion — they will wait."

Finally Chosen

When Carol Hayward, 72, of Kansas City, Kan., applied to Saint Luke's Hospital, the volunteer coordinator told her the wait list was at least four months. She told him she didn't care. She just wanted to be kept on the list.

"When he finally called, I just about jumped through my skin and got here as soon as I could," Hayward recalled. That was two years ago. Today, volunteers at Saint Luke's could wait as long as a year before a baby cuddler position opens.

"All my friends want to be Cuddlers," Hayward said. "And I tell them they better get their name on a list now."



By [Kim Mueller](#)

Kim Mueller is an award-winning journalist based in Kansas City, Mo. She worked as a health, education and investigative reporter for five daily newspapers, and writes for several local and national publications.

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