**Earlier this year, representatives from NEDA and Compassion and Choices joined forces at the American Society on Aging's 2024 meeting.**

**Here's What Happened....**

**ASA Conference Recap**

**Submitted by Meagan Williams, M.S. Ed., Clinical Engagement & Education Program Manager at Compassion and Choices**

8am on the first day of a conference is not quite “prime time” for a session on death. But - at the American Society on Aging’s (ASA) 2024 meeting, professionals from aging care packed a room to hear three doulas speak about their work. I am lucky to have been one of them, alongside Bay Area doula and NEDA member Rhyena Halpern, and our beloved NEDA President Ashley Johnson. This experience, and the collaboration between NEDA and Compassion & Choices, was a highlight of my year.

In 2020, I turned to Compassion & Choices for resources I could use with doula clients; at the time I was volunteering my services while working a full-time job, and was drawn to Compassion & Choices’ mission and free tools. The focus of Compassion & Choices is to empower communities, families, and individuals (much like we aim to do as doulas) and it spoke to me deeply as I started making more connections in the work. I was hired full-time in 2021 and all these years later it brings me so much joy to see more end-of-life doulas on staff and volunteering with us - serving on leadership councils, sharing their experiences through our storytelling program, and working to advocate for improved end-of-life care in their communities. About a year ago, I joined the Clinical Engagement team and my role is focused on clinical education initiatives as well as engaging with doulas on a deeper level.

Last fall, I submitted a proposal to ASA for “On Aging”, which aimed to highlight the work of doulas by answering frequently asked questions and sharing real stories from the bedside. When it was accepted, I knew we wanted NEDA connected. Ashley’s connections to Compassion & Choices run deep, and over the last few years she has become a critically important collaborator, serving on our African American Leadership Council, sharing her story on our website, and volunteering locally as an action team leader for our advocacy work in Florida.

I called Ashley nervously to pitch the presentation - and she could not have been more excited. Soon, NEDA signed up for an exhibition booth at the conference and plane tickets were booked. Rhyena Halpern is an incredible doula and long-time supporter of end-of-life options, so I was thrilled she could join us as well to share her perspective and experiences working in the Bay Area, where the conference was held. ASA members come from all corners of the professional world in the U.S., but each are working with and on behalf of older adults.

After months of Zoom meetings together, lots of planning, and plenty of pacing in the hotel room - the morning of our presentation came. With more than 2,000 attendees at the conference, and hundreds of sessions, we had no clue who would show but simply hoped for a group of engaged folks - no matter the size. To our shock and delight, 100 people shoved themselves into our presentation room at 8:00am, some even sitting on the floor. For that hour we spoke about the work of death doulas, about advance care planning, about having conversations with loved ones, and advocated for the inclusion of doulas into care teams whenever possible. We shared Compassion & Choices and NEDA resources, and extended invitations to connect with us if people were interested in how the work of EOL doulas might mesh with their own.

For the next four days of the conference, I was stopped in the hallways of the hotel and in the line at the coffee shop, by people who loved our session. They introduced themselves as case managers for their county aging services, leaders in healthcare systems, researchers, counselors at nonprofit organizations, students of gerontology or social work, and more.

A few of the most common things we heard were:

*“I had no idea this existed!”
“I wish I had a doula for a loss in my life”
“How can I find a doula near me/my organization?”
“How can my organization/company/service collaborate with doulas?” “I thought this would be morbid, but you made it so fun!”
“Thank you”*

Of course, some people just wanted to talk. Ashley, Rhyena, and I became safe spaces for grief at the conference, with multiple instances of people approaching us to talk about death and dying. I found myself holding space for discussion of partner loss, pet loss, family dynamics, and fear; I know Rhyena and Ashley did too. Each time we saw each other, one of us had another story to share.

This experience was powerful, unexpected, and rejuvenating. I came away with a deeper appreciation for my peers, and gratitude for NEDA’s leadership and support. As I look ahead to the coming years, and ways that Compassion & Choices can uplift and support end-of-life doulas, I am humbled to have the opportunity to be a part of it.