

Faith-based leaders, VNSNY address hospice access in Harlem, Bronx

by **CHANDRA WILSON** March 24, 2022



Left to right: Corey Kennard, Michelle Drayton, and Rev. Jacques Andre DeGraff Credit: Photo courtesy of VNSNY

Since its founding more than 130 years ago, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) has made equal access to health care

central to its non-profit mission. Today, the organization leads the charge in improving access to health care for all New Yorkers, including compassionate, culturally sensitive end-of-life care.

According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, a mere 8% of African American Medicare beneficiaries enroll in hospice, compared with 48% of white enrollees. VNSNY founded the HOPE (Hospice Outreach Patient and Provider Education) Program in 2015 to address this stark health care disparity and improve access to hospice information and care for residents of Harlem. The program was so successful, it was expanded in 2020 to the Bronx.

Through the HOPE Program, VNSNY works with neighborhood doctors' offices, hospitals, community-based health care providers and other health care leaders so they can talk to patients about hospice and palliative care as illness progresses or reaches the terminal stage. Local faith-based leaders also play an important role because they can help people understand how this kind of care fits in with faith and beliefs. Additionally, the HOPE Program works with community groups to help people plan for their future, talk to their families, and to learn that hospice can actually give them more time with the people they love.

As part of its community outreach programming, a VNSNY Hospice team, spearheaded by Michelle Drayton, RN, MPH, director for Hospice and Palliative Care Outreach and the HOPE and Connect2Well programs hosted the first in its 2022 event series for faith and community leaders. The historic Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem was the setting for this sold-out event, which took place on Friday, February 18. HOPE HEALS:

FAITH EMPOWERS was designed to educate faith leaders about the HOPE and CONNECT2WELL programs and their mission to address the underutilization and lack of access to home care and health services among chronically ill and at-risk Black and Latinx adults.

By working with key stakeholders, community-based organizations and faith leaders, the goal of the HOPE program is to bridge the gap in information and access to resources within Harlem and the Bronx.

Chaired by Pastor Corey Kennard, pastor of Amplify Christian Church; Jacques DeGraff, associate pastor at Canaan Baptist Church of Christ; and Michelle Drayton, the event provided an opportunity for community leaders to meet and dialogue with members of VNSNY's leadership. This special gathering was designed to cultivate relationships with faith and community leaders and raise awareness about VNSNY's services and how to access them.

"It was truly remarkable to gather leaders from the community and introduce them to all VNSNY has to offer," said Drayton, who organized the event. "It's such important work—spreading the word in these communities about the powerful benefits that come from providing physical and spiritual healing where people live—in their homes and neighborhoods. It was a fantastic opportunity to share our perspective on the many types of care that VNSNY provides in home and community settings."

Members of VNSNY leadership spoke at the event, including VNSNY CEO Dan Savitt, who offered his insight as to why this type of collaboration is so important.

“One of the most essential aspects of effective health care is communication, so we looked at this event as one step in a conversation that we hope will continue for months and years to come,” said Savitt. “I’m thankful for the opportunity to connect with these groups, and to open the door for more people to receive the kind of physical, emotional and spiritual care that can make the end of life a truly uplifting experience.”

“Whatever the challenges our communities face, we will be here, working together to create a world where health and access to care are a collective good, shared by all,” Savitt emphasized.

The event continued with presentations by members of Behavioral Health, CHOICE, CHHA and Hospice. Representatives from community-based organizations and several elected officials were also in attendance.

To learn more about HOPE or other VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care programs, please visit www.VNSNY.org, or call 1-800-675-0391.