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Health & Fitness

## VNSNY Founder's Influence on Public Health Nursing is Profound

Lillian Wald, America's First Public Health Nurse, as Essential Today as Ever



As we enter the third Women's History Month in the midst of the prolonged COVID-19 crisis—a time when the heroism of nurses is more evident than ever—let's take this opportunity to recognize the influential woman who founded public health nursing, Lillian Wald. Wald coined the term "public health nurse" in 1893 when she mobilized a team of nurses who worked outside of hospitals and specialized in lower income communities that paid only what they could afford. Nearly 130 years later, Wald's tireless efforts to provide accessible, in-home nursing care to the residents of the New York

area are evident in the work of the organization she founded, [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#) (VNSNY).

For Wald, inspiration struck at age 16 when she observed the extraordinary care of the nurse tending to her older sister during childbirth. Wald soon enrolled in the nursing program at New York Hospital Training School, where she learned the fundamentals of nursing and embarked on her decades-long career as one of the most influential nurses in history.

Soon after completing nursing school, Wald taught hygiene and nursing to immigrant women on the Lower East Side, many of whom lived in awful conditions in tenements. One morning, the daughter of one of Wald's students came into the classroom in tears, saying that her mother was sick. Wald followed the child to her family's apartment, where she found a woman lying in a dirty bed soaked with blood. The child's mother had been hemorrhaging since giving birth two days earlier.

Determined to be a catalyst for substantial change, Wald called upon friends and local philanthropists, and along with her nursing colleague and friend Mary Brewster, established public health nursing in the U.S., as they provided care for their neighbors' illnesses and assisted with births and deaths.

A national leader in service to children, families and the poor, Wald founded the [Henry Street Settlement House](#), which gave birth to VNSNY. Wald insisted on [building a playground](#) in the backyard of the settlement to provide children with a proper place for recreation within the bustling, busy neighborhoods. She went on to start the Outdoor Recreation League, where she successfully advocated for more public playgrounds around New York.

Coupled with her nursing practice, Wald also was largely responsible for the appointment of nurses in schools to help with minor ailments that would otherwise go untreated, usually resulting in children being sent home from school, sometimes for large periods of time.

In addition to her years of work in the betterment of her community, Lillian Wald was an integral part of the women's suffrage movement and championed for women's rights to birth control. She [led marches](#) in protest of World War I, helped establish the [NAACP](#), the [United States Children's Bureau](#), [National Child Labor Committee](#), and the [National Women's Trade Union League](#), the first such organization for women workers. She hired [Elizabeth Tyler](#) as the first Black visiting nurse for the Settlement, making it possible for Elizabeth to expand care to Harlem. It is little wonder that in 1922, The New York Times included Wald in a list of the 12 greatest living American women?

Throughout her career, Lillian Wald never lost sight of the fact that the health of the community affected the health of the individual. By seeking to improve the lives of women, children, and immigrants, she sent the example that extended well beyond New York, with settlement houses, playgrounds, and school nurse appointments emerging throughout the country.

The impact Lillian Wald had on public health continues today through VNSNY's mission of compassionate care and public health innovation, which is delivered to more than 40,000 New Yorkers on any given day. As the City celebrates Women's History Month, Lillian Wald and the essential caregivers who follow in her footsteps deserve a salute indeed.