

National Nurses Month: Why home care nurses are more essential than ever



Jane Reilly (RN, Clinical Care Manager, [VNS Health](#)) is a born-and-raised East Northport nurse who has spent her career caring for the Long Island community. Growing up, Reilly's extended family lived on the same East Northport street, and as her grandparents aged, she and her family helped care for them. That experience instilled in Reilly the belief that caregiving was not just in her blood, but her calling. She went into home care, caring for some of the most vulnerable in the community, right in their homes. Today, Reilly oversees clinicians across Long Island and Queens, mentoring and guiding the next generation of caregivers, all while still living on the street she grew up on. Earlier this month, she was named VNS Health's 2026 Nurse of the Year.

When I was growing up on Long Island, caring for others was ingrained in me from an early age. Like many in our East Northport neighborhood, my parents cared for both sets of grandparents, either in our home or in their homes nearby. It wasn't unusual for generations of family to be gathered in one room – and while we cared for my grandparents as they aged, the wisdom and love they brought into our home was just as much a gift.

As a result, I saw early on the importance of helping families stay in their homes. There's something magical about having a grandparent there to celebrate their grandchild's first birthday or getting advice from mom when you've had a tough day or hearing your grandfather retell his favorite joke (still funny after the hundredth time!). These moments make up what family is all about.

Those experiences led me to a career in nursing that felt less like a job choice and more of a calling. This May is National Nurses Month, and as I look back on over forty years in home care nursing, I'm reminded what an essential thread caregivers are, especially those who work right in their patients' homes, in keeping the vibrant tapestry of Long Island life going strong.

Families may be less inclined to live close to one another today than they were when I was growing up, but that hasn't kept the need for caregivers from growing. [Eighteen percent of Suffolk County](#)

[residents](#) are now over the age of 65, and as that population increases, home-based care will become not just a choice, but the go-to way we receive care. As we age, the desire to stay in the place we know best becomes stronger, and that can be difficult without the right support.

That is where home care nurses step in.

To give you just one example: a client of mine, an elderly man with deteriorating health, was blind and living in a walk-up apartment. His habit of collecting things quickly turned into a more dangerous hoarding situation. His family was worried, but they also lived far away. With help from my team at the home and community health care nonprofit [VNS Health](#), where I work, we were able to put a plan into action that addressed more than just the “clutter.”

To start, we worked with the client’s insurer to secure the services of home health aides who could help him with daily tasks like showering, getting dressed and preparing healthy meals. We also found a visiting doctor to provide in-home care and connected the client with a community vision program that helped ensure his living space was safe. To make his apartment more livable, we secured coverage for a cleaning service. This all took time, but it was gratifying to bring together these resources so he could age in place where he was most comfortable.

If I’ve learned anything in my 40-plus years in this field, it’s that empathy and the ability to listen may feel like a small choice, but they can have the biggest impact on people’s well-being.

Working in a person’s home helps in this regard, by giving us a clearer picture of the patient’s needs. When I first meet a patient, I ask a lot of questions of them. I direct just as many questions to the family caregivers. A daughter caring for her mother with dementia might tell me she’s feeling overwhelmed because she won’t be able to take her kids on summer vacation, so we work together to find her mom short-term respite care from an experienced aide. If a patient explains they haven’t been taking their medication because they can’t get the prescription bottles open, we’ll arrange for blister packs that they can use more easily. When an older retired man caring for his wife confides that he’s struggling to afford healthy groceries so he’s been skipping meals, we can tap into our network of community resources to connect the couple with affordable or free grocery delivery.

Finding solutions for families is one of the most rewarding parts of home care nursing, and every day brings a new challenge. By making connections and educating families on what resources are out there, we remind them that they’re not alone.

Nurses Month is a time to thank America’s nurses, but it’s also a time to recognize what nursing care makes possible. In homes across Long Island, nurses and caregivers are helping older adults stay safe, connected, and a part of the communities they worked their lives to build. This may happen quietly behind front doors, but its impact reaches us all.

Northport Journal is a local, reader-supported news outlet covering Northport, East Northport, and nearby Long Island communities. It publishes community-focused reporting on village government, schools, local businesses, events, people, the outdoors, and civic issues. It reaches an estimated audience of 9,000 through their website and social media.