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VNSNY Expanding Gender-Affirmation Program

Visiting Nurse Service of New York is growing a program that provides home care services after gender-affirmation surgery.

When the program started in 2016, nurses were working solely with patients who had undergone bottom surgery, such as vaginoplasty. But by last year the volume of patients had increased by nearly one-half, and nurses began working with patients who had undergone top or facial surgeries, such as chest masculinization or facial feminization, as well.

The move came after increased insurance coverage for top and facial surgeries. It also has contributed to repeat patients for the program.

To date the program has served more than 350 patients and trained about 230 nurses in cultural sensitivity and the clinical care of those who have undergone gender-affirmation surgeries, said Shannon Whittington, a registered nurse and director of the program. It's serving between 20 and 30 patients a month.

The program's growth also is being driven by collaboration with doctors who refer patients for home care after other surgeries, such as knee and hip replacements.

"This is new for us this year," Whittington said. "I think it's really important for patients to have a culturally-sensitive nurse who has been trained to take care of LGBT patients. These patients need to feel like they're not going to be judged and can be themselves in their home."

Additionally, she said, the program has begun collaborating with community-based organizations that serve individuals who may be considering a gender-affirmation surgery.

Typically the time of service ranges from two weeks to two months. Patients have ranged in age from 18 to their 80s.

"I'm proud of the commitment we've made to the LGBT community, and we have put a lot of effort into the Stonewall generation," Whittington said. "We want the world to know we have health care for LGBT patients." —Jennifer Henderson