

MANHATTAN VOICE

Caring For Our Veterans: VNSNY Salutes Those Who Served



Joseph Vitti, Director of the Hospice Veterans Program at the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, liaison, salutes a VNSNY Hospice patient and WWII veteran following medals ceremony.

By Chandra Wilson, November 9, 2020

One warm summer day, in a New York high-rise apartment, a bedridden World War II veteran receiving care from [Visiting Nurse Service of New York Hospice and Palliative Care](#) received an unexpected surprise. The veteran, Edward Flanagan, had enlisted in the Navy after his beloved older brother died in combat and went on to see action in the Pacific theater. He later became a successful bank executive and active member of the community in his hometown of New Rochelle, New York—but like most war veterans, he was shadowed by memories, some more painful than others. It also saddened Mr. Flanagan that his Naval medals and discharge papers had gone missing.



VNSNY Hospice Veterans Program Director Joseph Vitti was at his bedside with duplicates of the medals he had earned, and a copy of his discharge papers as well, thanks to Joe's hard work and determined outreach to the Department of Defense and the National Archives. In the presence of Edwards' wife and a family friend, Joe awarded the medals one by one, briefly explaining what each represented before pinning it on Edward's chest: the American Campaign Theater Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Theater Medal, the World War II Victory medal.

Efforts like these have led the national *We Honor Veterans* campaign to award the VNSNY Hospice Veterans Program the highest rating: Level Five.

Developed and run by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization with the aid of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), *We Honor Veterans* collaborates with hospices, state hospice organizations, and VA facilities to spread awareness among U.S. military veterans of the end-of-life care and benefits that are available to them. *We Honor Veterans* upgrades their hospice partners on the basis of how well they've fulfilled the requirements for each level, which range from providing veteran-centric education to staff and volunteers and identifying patients with a military history (Level 1) to developing or strengthening partnerships with VA medical centers and veterans organizations like the VFW and American Legion (Level 5). Level Five emphasizes care for Veterans of the Vietnam War, many of whom experience chronic and debilitating oncological and neurological symptoms as a result of exposure to Agent Orange.

This year, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, VNSNY has expanded its Veterans Outreach Program beyond Hospice, and has enlisted Christopher Webster—himself a proud 16-year disabled U.S. Army Veteran—as the program's Outreach Liaison for VNSNY Home Care. Made possible thanks to a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation, this important program was created to enrich veterans' lives by offering support and guidance wherever needed, providing essential equipment to disabled veterans at no charge, and helping veterans and their families navigate the often-confusing application processes to obtain the veterans' home care benefits to which they are entitled—much as VNSNY's Hospice Veterans program does for Hospice patients.

"It is my honor to assist my fellow vets in securing those benefits that can help them to reach their highest functional level and stay safe at home in their community," says Christopher Webster, who draws on his personal experience as an Army combat and flight medic during multiple deployments to better empathize with and advocate for the veterans in his care.

"As a vet myself, I understand some of the challenges service men and women face as they age or cope with serious illness," Webster adds. "Working with VNSNY, my team and I are able to connect vets and their families with the high-quality health care and services they not only need, but so richly deserve. It is truly a privilege to get to know and assist America's military heroes."

Joseph Vitti, who has been with VNSNY for five years now and directs the VNSNY Hospice *We Honor Veterans* program, served in the Global War on Terror. Both VNSNY programs make veterans and their families aware of their benefits and

help them get their documents in order, which can often be a daunting task. Joe and Chris, along with other VNSNY Veterans Program team members, including former Army medic [Sung Yoon](#), who saw active duty in Afghanistan, guide Vets and their families through the maze of the Veterans Affairs healthcare system on a daily basis. They also train staff members and volunteers to understand the impact that wartime combat can have on veterans, even decades later—most commonly, post-traumatic stress disorder and survivor's guilt.

“When working with hospice veterans, it's important to remember that many have already faced life and death on the battlefield” says Vitti. “Veterans are selfless people who want to help others. Now, they're asking a hospice team and their family or friends to take care of them, and they often find it hard.”

If a veteran's case is difficult, a member of the team may use telehealth or make an in-person visit to the patient's family to offer support as well. Members of the VNSNY Veterans Outreach team regularly connect with veterans organizations across New York City's five boroughs to maintain relationships with them and take care of other veteran-related matters. Several times a month, they orchestrate intimate ceremonies like the one with Mr. Flanagan, honoring hospice veterans for anything from an act of courage in combat to aiding fellow veterans in their community.

Especially for these heroic patients, the recovery of medals and papers provides a sense of pride and sometimes end-of-life closure, while the ceremony itself shines a bright light on the veteran's military service achievements at any point in the journey of life.

“Every war veteran has a unique story,” says Joe. “The work we do and our partnership with *We Honor Veterans* make it possible for us to let veterans in New York City know their service has not gone unnoticed, and that it is greatly appreciated.”

Veterans outreach programs with the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#) ensure that U.S. veterans receive full hospice benefits related to their military service. The VNSNY Hospice We Honor Veterans program also provides end-of-life care that recognizes and takes into account their wartime experiences. For more information, please call: [1-800-675-0391](tel:1-800-675-0391) or [download this brochure](#).