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The Meaning of Social Service



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VNSNY Social Worker Kenia Alcantara in the field

“I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.” — Rabindranath Tagore

The pandemic has certainly made life more challenging for all of us over the last year. But, like all crises, it’s taken the greatest toll on those whose day-to-day lives were already difficult: at-risk children, seniors struggling with isolation and illness, people wrestling with addiction and homelessness, those suffering from disabilities and families having a hard time making ends meet. In New York City, where I’ve just taken over as the CEO of one of the nation’s largest nonprofit home- and community-based health care organizations, the COVID-19 health crisis has magnified the [urgency we feel](#) every day to serve society’s most vulnerable.

This month marks both [National Social Work Month](#) and the first anniversary of the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic — which gives us an important opportunity to reflect and to shine a light on the many faces of the talented, committed people doing the vital work of social service. Social service is a broad category that includes the work of social workers and community mental health specialists, bereavement and spiritual care counselors, visiting nurses and care managers and home health aides who help vulnerable people get through the day. It also includes people behind the scenes — the staff answering phones at the call centers, schedulers who make sure the right care gets to the right people at the right time, translators who make health care more accessible by speaking the many languages of New York, and navigators who help people manage obstacles to care.



Leslie Davis, Certified Alcohol and Substance Use Counselor at VNSNY

Social service includes the work of Leslie Davis, a certified alcohol and substance use counselor, who is the first point of connection for New Yorkers applying for benefits such as cash assistance, Medicaid and food stamps. As an assessment specialist for the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York \(VNSNY\)](#), Leslie goes beyond the application process, listening carefully to see what might be standing in the way of employment for her clients and exploring how her team can help.

Would the client benefit from substance use treatment, or [mental health services](#) for depression or anxiety? Maybe there's an unattended medical issue that needs to be addressed. Or perhaps the client lost a loved one, and [grief](#) is standing in the way of progress. In that case, for example, Leslie can recommend that the case manager — the next link in the chain — connect the client to bereavement counseling as part of [Hospice and Palliative Care Services](#).

Social service also includes creating effective ways to reach children and adolescents struggling with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and other crises, as [quarantine](#), remote schooling, and the economic upheaval of the pandemic take a toll on families. At an after-school program at the [FRIENDS](#) clinic that VNSNY runs for emotionally at-risk children, social work assistant Deneice Santana and family counselor Nelson Delgado have been busy finding virtual games — Jeopardy, Pictionary, scavenger hunts — that weave in exercise and fun with important coping skills.

And it includes the work of Yungae Yook, a hospice social worker who helps bring quality of life to the end of life for patients and families in the [mostly Asian neighborhoods](#) of Flushing, Queens. “I could never do my job alone,” she says.

“To do my job completely, I communicate regularly with a whole team: the coordinator of care, the team manager, nurses, spiritual care counselors, the physician, a translator if I need one, and my fellow social workers.” Even after the patient's death, the care continues, with [bereavement](#) counselors helping families navigate grief for the next year.

One of our social work managers likens social services work to running a relay race, which I find to be a beautiful — and useful — image for picturing how it all works. Leslie talks about a “warm handoff,” which means that she provides the next person in the relay, the case manager, with hard-won background information that Leslie has gathered from the client. This helps the case manager see the client as a whole person and meet them where they are in life's journey.

Kenia Alcantara, a social worker, knows it takes a lot of handoffs and coordination to make sure her vulnerable clients get the services they need. Although Kenia is alone when she enters the cluttered Bronx apartment of an elderly woman recovering from COVID, she is accompanied in spirit and in service by a whole team. The physical therapist helps the client get stronger, nurses manage her recovery, home health aides assist with daily activities, navigators sort out complicated [Medicaid](#) and Medicare benefits, and the information technology team helps Kenia keep track of her data.

Kenia also connects clients to such community-based resources as mental health counselors, Meals on Wheels, and Adult Protective Services to help this particular client manage clutter safely.

This team-based social service is what VNSNY's founder, [Lillian Wald](#), was guided by more than 128 years ago when she created the role of "public health nurse" — whose care was very much informed by social determinants of health (although that term came much later). Housing, nutrition, infection prevention, health education, employment — if these basic social elements were not in place, how could individuals and families be healthy?

Today, we are dealing with many of these same challenges. Add addiction and homelessness, and now, a global pandemic with its wave of mental health challenges, children trying to attend school remotely, elders isolated at home — and it's clear that our social services teams, some 500 strong, have their work cut out for them!

For all our success stories though, there are still too many people who fall through the cracks. I know there's more we need to do — and *can* do — in terms of access: to mental health care, to substance use treatment and follow-up, to much-needed safe housing. So as we recognize Social Work Month and look ahead in this still-turbulent and uncertain time, I am seeking the insights and expertise of our people on the front lines of social service care more than ever. They and the teams who support them will teach us what more we need to do to "meet people where they are" and help them get to where they want to be — moving from isolation to community, from addiction to recovery, dependence to independence.

The paths will be many, but all the different ways we get there will have one thing in common: we will do it *together*.