

Hospice Nurse Fights for Vets "Who Fought for Us"

By Astra Johnson



VNSNY, Community Contributor ✓

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Joseph Vitti, Director of the Hospice Veterans Program at Visiting Nurse Service of New York salutes a U.S. Veteran in a special military service recognition ceremony.

Memorial Day, which falls on the last day of [Military Appreciation Month](#), is a dedicated day of reflection for those who have sacrificed their lives for our country. Many veterans, a majority of whom experience critical health issues after their time in service, however, do not receive the adequate care they need. Since 2015, The Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) has worked with veterans to remediate this issue through its dedicated [Veterans Program](#), which served more than 900 veterans and their loved ones in the past year alone.

Erica Wigley, a registered nurse and VNSNY Hospice Veterans Liaison based in Queens, works with veterans in Queens and Manhattan.



Erica Wigley, RN, VNSNY Hospice Veterans Liaison based in Queens

As part of its [Hospice Veterans Program](#), VNSNY is a participant in the national "We Honor Veterans" program: a collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Administration and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO). The program is available to all eligible veterans, no matter what disease they have, which military branch they served in, or what their combat status is. VNSNY is the only home hospice provider that serves all five boroughs of New York City and has earned Level Five status—the highest level—with We Honor Veterans. The Veterans Program also provides bedside recognition by presenting certificates, blankets, pins, care packages and sometimes even awarded service medals to veterans to honor their service near end of life.

"The compassionate care VNSNY provides is one of the most rewarding aspects of my job," says Wigley.

"Sometimes, people ask me how I can work in hospice, and I reply, 'How can I not?'"

Providing support and comfort to veterans and their families at the end of life, and dedicated time during the final stage of life, is a humbling service. It gives patients and their families the chance to make the most of their time together and helps reduce panic and stress."

Wigley and her fellow Veteran Liaisons at VNSNY are the "go between" coordinators easing veterans and their caregivers into hospice care, overseeing logistical details of entry and educating them on the goals of hospice, what kind of care the patient will receive, what benefits and services they are eligible and any additional concerns the patient or caregiver might have. They also help expedite the recovery of misplaced military service records (discharge papers) which are critical for any veteran benefit.

Wigley, whose grandfather served in WWI and father served in WWII, previously worked with both active-duty veterans returning from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan and retired veterans at Walter Reed National Military Medical, as well as the Pentagon, Andrews Airforce Base, Ft. Belvoir and Quantico, where she offered holistic services for pain management. Just days before moving to New York to be with her mother, Wigley was informed about VNSNY.

"During one of my final days at my previous job, one of my patients informed me that she used to work for The Visiting Nurse Service of New York and that it was a wonderful company to work for," says Wigley.



Erica Wigley's father, WWII veteran

"She advised me to look for any open positions, and after seeing that VNSNY had a division dedicated to veterans, I applied immediately."

Veteran Liaisons play a significant role in VNSNY Hospice's attentive and personalized approach, especially as they understand (often firsthand) how being in the military, especially in combat, can affect a person. Listening to each veteran's story helps liaisons guide them through upsetting memories that may surface at the end of life, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), survivor's guilt or depression, as well as service-related injuries and illnesses, substance abuse, effects of Agent Orange and more.

New York City is home to more than 200,000 veterans. The transition from military to civilian life that many veterans face is often stressful, isolating and can take a lifetime. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many New York Vets were struggling with profound social isolation issues.

Wigley, who is a trained Reiki Master and Chopra Meditation Instructor, spearheads a meditation program for veterans. Every Friday, she holds meditation classes at local Vet Centers with an intimate group of attendees to focus on inner healing and peace.

"Teaching mindfulness practices to help navigate life's circumstances, foster a positive mindset and increase overall well-being is a gift,"

says Wigley. "It brings a smile to my face to work with a close-knit group of individuals who show up each week to better themselves and achieve fulfillment. Veterans may often carry unresolved trauma or mental issues that have never been brought to the surface—or even realized. Holistic wellness is vital to quality of life, and especially as we age."

"Memorial Day is a time to reflect on the lives of those who fought for our country," adds Wigley, "but we want to carry that spirit with us all year long and show gratitude to those who are still with us. They fought hard for us, now we're in the position to fight for them."

