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Despite COVID-19 risk, Queens nurses provide care and comfort for homebound patients

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HOME CARE NURSE NINA MIRO IS FIGHTING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON THE FRONTLINES IN QUEENS. PHOTO VIA VNSNY

By Victoria Merlino

Home care nurse Nina Miro doesn't have a special station to don her personal protective equipment, or PPE. Sometimes, when she goes to see a patient, it will be cold, or a place she's never been to before. A lot of times, she'll put on her gown, mask and gloves out of the back of her car.

"This is the biggest challenge in my career," said Miro, who was a nurse during 9/11. "This is the apocalypse of my career, for sure. Hopefully we never have to deal with anything like this again."

Miro is a home care nurse in Queens with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, the largest nonprofit home- and community-based care organization in the United States. As COVID-19 continues to grip New York City, nurses like Miro face unique challenges as they care for patients who aren't isolated in hospital rooms and wards, but are instead stuck in cramped apartments, duplexes, basements and split levels.

Under normal circumstances, home care can be a lifeline for older adults and people with disabilities, as well as people who exit the hospital and need help dressing wounds, taking medication and continuing life after an illness or injury.

But in the age of COVID and social distancing, home care nurses play a key role providing emotional support for patients unable to interact with anyone else.

"We're a comfort to them because their anxiety level is through the roof," she said.

Miro said she has had to take even more precautions than usual to protect herself from the virus. She tries to take a minimal amount of items into patients' homes, frequently washes her hands and jumps directly into the shower when she gets home.

She said her friends have been worried about her health, but she remains committed to helping her patients survive the pandemic.

"Some of my friends have said, 'Nina, quit!' Like it's so easy. But that's not what we do," she said.

Berkis Oken, a hospice nurse based in Southern Queens, said that she is now conducting many virtual visits and making more telephone calls, in addition to seeing patients in person. The mask she wears can make it difficult for patients to see her expressions, she said, so she tries to communicate emotions with her eyes.

"We are here, we are fighting with you right through it," she tells the patients she serves.

To make her patients feel more comfortable about her entering their home during the pandemic, nurse Nancy Girlando said that she sometimes asks patients' family members to perform certain tasks under her supervision, like taking blood pressure. She also makes sure that she visits non-COVID patients before visiting people who have tested positive for COVID-19, as another precaution.

"You have to think about how to make that visit as comfortable as possible when you're wearing a shield," she said. "You have to be distant, but you can't be emotionally distant."

Girlando, a nurse based in the Rockaways, said that she's worried about the emotional impact that the pandemic is having on patients that go to the hospital and then return home.

"Getting the COVID [virus] is traumatizing," she said. In her experience, patients are very happy to be home, but can't shake the things they saw in the hospital during the pandemic's worst days.

The hospital scenes are "images that they're not going to forget," she said.

Like her colleagues, Girlando said she refuses to give her up on her patients during this public health crisis.

"The role we play out here is pivotal," she said.