

# ***Queens Voice***

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## REDUCING HEALTH CARE DISPARITIES-VNSNY

### **Public Health Advocate Mark Godfrey Supports Diversity and People Living with HIV**



Mark Godfrey

**By Chandra Wilson, August 25, 2020**

Mark Godfrey, a resident of Ozone Park, Queens, knows that when it comes to healthcare, not everyone feels empowered or understands how to access the care they need. And as the coronavirus crisis continues to show us, that's especially so for people of color.

Mr. Godfrey has two decades' experience advocating for the complex, comprehensive health care needs of people living with HIV—including himself. Since he was first diagnosed in 2000, Godfrey has worked with at-risk individuals and communities as a Consumer Representative on the Housing Works Executive Board Of Directors, a member of the New York-Presbyterian Consumer Advisory Board, a peer educator at Housing Works and, most recently, as a Certified Recovery Peer Advocate for The Alliance for Positive Change.

"We can't just treat the bodies, we must understand cultures and behaviors, so that messaging is relatable and obtainable," says Mark, who recently joined the VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans Board of Directors as a Member Representative from the SelectHealth Medicaid HIV Special Needs Plan. "I've always been proactive and an idealist," he adds. "I see things not the way they are, but the way they can be. I have experienced my own health care challenges, and I bring that firsthand perspective to the board."

Mark is a strong supporter of [SelectHealth](#), a specialized Medicaid plan for people living with HIV, and finds it “right on target” in meeting his needs.

In his new role on the CHOICE Board, Mark represents the voice of SelectHealth plan members, helping to ensure that the organization is doing everything it can to meet their holistic needs, including medical, behavioral and complex pharmaceutical care.

“Mark is a tremendous asset to the organization,” says Tom Dwyer, Senior Vice President of VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans. “He’s been working in the health care field for a long time as a certified peer coordinator whose job on a daily basis is to connect people with HIV to the care that they need and deserve. He lives our mission and challenges every day.”

“I have come to rely on this plan’s consistency and advocacy,” Mark says. “And think it is a great example of how members can be part of their own care.”

Mark also has a keen interest in reducing health care disparities and is eager to bring more diverse views and experiences onto the board. “My hope is to continue the conversation on inclusion, and bring an important perspective to the question of how we can continue to provide the best services for *all* communities,” he says—adding that the coronavirus pandemic has amplified the urgency of reducing entrenched disparities of care in minority communities.

“Listening is critically important,” Mark says. “I’m proud to have this opportunity to share my experience and insights both as a person living with HIV and as a person of color. I’m also proud to have this opportunity to amplify the insights and perspectives of others in these communities in the pursuit of better health outcomes for all.”

“Mark’s views align with the quality goals and the diversity that we are focusing on,” says Hany Abdelaal, DO, President of VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans. “It’s always been part of VNSNY’s mission to care for vulnerable populations and address racial disparities. As a special needs plan, SelectHealth was created to meet needs that weren’t being addressed by other insurers. This involves helping people manage not only the disease, but the access to care disparities that exist in certain communities.”