

THE SENIOR GAZETTE

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Home Care Social Workers: **Being the Change They Want to See, Everyday**

By Chandra Wilson

March is national [Social Work Month](#), a time to learn about and acknowledge the meaningful impact that social workers have on so many lives. Social workers help individuals, families and community groups cope or navigate the obstacles they encounter in life, from medical or emotional challenges to access to education, care or government and support resources. Here in the New York City metropolitan area, an estimated 3,830 social workers are on the job, working in all kinds of settings, from hospitals and nursing homes to schools, military bases, rehab centers and in the home.

At the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), hundreds of social workers travel hundreds of miles and make hundreds of phone calls every single week. Rarely in the limelight, they may see their patients only a few times, but despite this short duration, the work they do can have an enormous impact.

In celebration of this important month, here are a few profiles of New York City social workers who actively embody the values of this year's [National Social Workers Association](#) awareness campaign: "**Social Workers: Leaders. Advocates. Champions.**"

A Leader in Uncertain Times: As a Hospice Social Worker with VNSNY, Joel Karlin, who lives and works in Queens, leads those he cares for and their families through the final weeks and days of life. To help ease fears and bring people together, Karlin often encourages friends and family members of the dying to be a calm presence, just holding their loved one's hand, or sitting close by. "What we are trying to do is normalize what they are going through," says Joel. "We want family members to know what the very end of life looks like and what they can do when the time comes. What can they do? Literally, just hold your loved one's hand." Sometimes it's hard to understand how such a seemingly small gesture could ever be enough, but what our hospice social workers see time and time again, is the power of just that single act: holding a hand, and letting go.

An Advocate, a Voice for the Voiceless: Christine Garcia, a social worker with VNSNY's **Home-Based Crisis Intervention (HBCI) Program** in Brooklyn, uses the same empathy that Joel Karlin brings to end-of-life care when she advocates for the youngest and most vulnerable among us: children in crisis. Funded by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, HBCI is available at no charge for children between 5 and 18 with acute mental health issues. Christine and her colleagues provide short-term, intensive treatment for children who demonstrate suicidal behaviors and ideation or severe depression. She works with her families to defuse the crisis and keep children at home when that can be safely done. "Speaking for people who have no voice or have problems like mental illness that are so misunderstood" is incredibly fulfilling for Christine. As a social worker she navigates the complex mental health system and protocols of the Department of Education, which reaffirms daily her mission to ensure that "kids with mental health issues don't fall through the cracks."

A Champion of the Everyday: "I like to say YES to people," says Lizzie Cogan, one of VNSNY's medical social workers working in Brooklyn, where she assists patients with major illnesses, usually upon release from the hospital, and helps them safely transition back to life at home and in the community. "One phone call can literally change a person's life," she adds. In a day's work, Lizzie might find herself connecting patients with a senior center, making referrals to support organizations such as CancerCare or helping them understand and make full use of their Medicaid benefits. One patient, for example, was spending a fortune on Uber, unaware of the transportation coverage available to him under Medicaid. A couple of calls resulted in hundreds of dollars saved.

Compassion and commitment to the most vulnerable among us makes these three social workers—and their colleagues at VNSNY and elsewhere—truly remarkable. "In a fairly limited amount of time, you can have a great impact on a patient," Lizzie notes. "In a one-hour visit you can identify and meet a lot of needs. What drives me is a curiosity to understand people's circumstances, hear their story, and then work out how to improve their situation. I'm grateful that I have the potential to walk in the patient's door, and later to leave with the feeling that I've had an impact on that person's well-being."

To learn more about the wide array of home care services available through the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, please call **1-800-675-0391**, or visit www.vnsny.org.