

Column

Home Care Social Workers Provide Compassion, Commitment

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.

Whether it's helping individuals, families or community groups cope or navigate the obstacles they encounter in life, ready-to-listen social workers – especially in the home care field – are true heroes of our healthcare professions.

At the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY), hundreds of social workers travel hundreds of miles and make hundreds of phone calls every single week as they advocate and care for patients throughout New York City's five boroughs and Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties. Rarely in the limelight, they may see their patients only a few times. Despite this short duration, the work they do can and often does have an enormous impact.

It Starts With Listening. Shana Maltzman, who works with hospice patients in Staten Island, says being a social worker is “in her blood.” Her 25-year career in the field has given her a chance to work with children, adults and those at the end of life.

For nearly a decade now Maltzman's been part of a close-knit group of nurses, doctors, spiritual counselors, home health aides and other social workers caring for hospice patients and their families.

“It is not always easy to let go of strong feelings or attachments that have shaped and given meaning to our lives,” Maltzman said. “As hospice social workers we always start by listening. Is someone afraid? Do they need to communicate unexpressed feelings? Are they angry or resistant to help? Are they concerned for the welfare of those they are leaving behind?”

When one of her patients wanted to see his home and family in Puerto Rico one last time, she coordinated services between his health teams in the U.S. and Puerto Rico to make sure that his oxygen and medications

were seamlessly transferred so he could make the trip.

“Returning to his family was something he wanted more than anything but was afraid to believe was possible,” Maltzman said. “I knew we had to try, and because we did, he finally made it home.”

Gives a Voice to the Voiceless. Christine Garcia, a social worker with VNSNY's Home-Based Crisis Intervention (HBCI) Program in Brooklyn, uses the same empathy that her colleague Shana Maltzman brings to end-of-life care by advocating for the youngest and most vulnerable among us: children in crisis.

Funded by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (HBCI) it is available at no charge for children between 5 and 18 with acute mental health issues.

Garcia 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,” she said. 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.”

Finds Solutions for Everyday Needs. “I like to say yes to people,” said Lizzie Cogan, one of VNSNY's medical social workers

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 added.

In a day's work, Cogan 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,” Cogan said. “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, call 1-800-675-0391 or visit www.vnsny.org.