

‘People Just Sat on Their Couches and Got Weaker.’ How The Pandemic Affected Mobility of Older Staten Islanders.



Joseph Ostapiuk, May 11, 2022

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — When the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hit New York City, Ibijoke Ayetiwa, affectionately known by her middle name, Betty, remembers the uncertainty surrounding what would happen next — a daunting reality in her profession as a senior physical therapist with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY).

Her most vulnerable patients appeared to be at greatest risk to the disease, and their physical health threatened to deteriorate without consistent activity and therapy.

Then it began to happen. Staten Islanders under her care were not able to regularly attend senior centers or participate in other regular recreation that would normally keep them active.

“It’s heartbreaking,” said Ayetiwa. “People basically just sat on their couches and got weaker and weaker and started having difficulty getting up and walking, and hence the falls started happening.”

‘They started struggling to get up’: How the pandemic affected mobility of older Staten Islanders



Barbara Briones during physical therapy at her Arden Heights home. (Staten Island Advance/Joseph Ostapiuk)

'They started struggling to get up': How the pandemic affected mobility of older Staten Islanders



Barbara Briones, left, and Ibijoke (Betty) Ayetiwa, right. (Staten Island Advance/Joseph Ostapiuk)

Barbara Briones, 85, cherishes her independence.

She lives alone in her Arden Heights home and said she enjoyed being able to go to the store and take care of herself. Then, arthritis began to slow her down — a condition that she said was worsened by restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

“It put me in my own house like a prison,” said Briones.

With her family more than 1,000 miles away in Florida, Briones felt helpless when her son and daughter-in-law contracted COVID-19. While concerns surrounding the virus swirled, trepidation began to set in when carrying out everyday tasks.

Afraid because of her pain and loss of mobility, each of her steps became a fear not only for herself, but for her family on the other end of the country.

Her son calls every day, she said, and the growing worry, compounded by her health, helped push her to decide on a move to Florida — putting behind a home she has lived in since 1985 and her coveted independence for a chance to be closer to her family.

When weighing the options, she said the choice is clear: “I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

While still on Staten Island, she said getting up in the morning is the hardest. She used to have significant difficulty just getting up from her chair in front of the television. But, she credits the persistence of Ayetiwa, her physical therapist, with noticeable steps of improvement that have enabled her to move more easily and even walk down the steps of her home without assistance.

Ayetiwa coaches Briones through sitting and standing exercises — activities Briones said she carries out herself throughout the day — as the soon-to-be-86-year-old relishes the opportunity to talk to her therapist, someone she said has been “a lifesaver.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without her,” said Briones.

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Barbara Briones during physical therapy at her Arden Heights home. (Staten Island Advance/Joseph Ostapiuk)

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Ibijoke Ayetiwa, affectionately known by her middle name, Betty, during a physical therapy session. (Staten Island Advance/Joseph Ostapiuk)

PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

Working for nearly two decades for VNSNY, Ayetiwa has seen it all. But the pandemic fronted her with new challenges that still persist, even more than two years after the first case was discovered on the borough.

While her role normally involves entering a patient's home and assessing the need for modifications to prevent falls and working to improve an individual's ability to do day-to-date activities, the outbreak initially shut down those efforts.

With inadequate PPE in the early days of March 2020, Ayetiwa said her work reverted to Zoom calls, a practice she said was simply not effective for the needs of her patients.

But, once proper PPE was acquired, she said they went right back to work — amid the uncertainty and restrictiveness caused in a world grappling with COVID-19.

Census data shows around 16% of Staten Islanders are over the age of 65, and while only a fraction of that number requires physical therapy, it underscores the extent of people whose physical lives were most significantly affected by the pandemic.

Even people who would walk once or twice a week began to be “deconditioned,” said Ayetiwa, a term referring to a loss of fitness primarily caused by lack of exercise.

“We started getting this huge, huge population of people coming in for just arthritic pain exacerbation,” she said, explaining that borough residents were quickly noticing how even brief periods of inactivity leads to tightening of the joints.

“Not only among the geriatric population, even among younger, middle-aged people,” she added. “I’m getting a lot of people just catching up and surgeries that they held back on during the pandemic ... and everyone now is slowly coming out of the woodwork to get the care that they need.

Ayetiwa said her career is most singularly focused on limiting patient falls. There’s a significant cost after a fall occurs, beginning with admittance into a hospital and potentially spiraling into surgeries and therapies.

The pandemic compounded those risks. Staten Islanders sent to nursing homes and other rehab facilities suffered infections, and rehab in congregate settings is not always effective for patients, she noted.

“Most people would rather stay in their own homes, get the services that they need, and that’s where VNSNY comes in,” she said.

REHABBING IN HOME

Rehabbing in the home, something the pandemic made more difficult, ultimately helps in daily life, as well, as unique settings in the house — a first step that is slightly taller than a second — are difficult to replicate and sometimes never factor into outside training regiments.

As attitudes shift in the pandemic and restrictions ease, Ayetiwa said she is noticing shifts in the homes she visits. Where hesitancy once reigned, seniors seem to be generally more willing to accept physical therapy — only it has come at the cost of months of a sedentary lifestyle, in some cases.

With warming weather, it is becoming easier to get her patients out of the house, a development she hopes will result in steady improvement after a pandemic that has wrought havoc on numerous aspects of everyday life.

Ayetiwa said people who aren’t yet undergoing physical therapy can do “TV exercises” like leg kicks and marching exercises during commercials that will help keep joints moving.

But, if someone is noticing they are losing their balance more often or getting winded doing basic activities, Ayetiwa urges them to call their doctor to start the process for a referral.



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