

# ***QUEENS VOICE***

## **For Speech-Language Pathologists, Actions Speak Just as Loud as Words**



*By Chandra Wilson, June 10, 2022*

NEW YORK - From catching up with a friend over the phone, to telling a partner “I love you,” or being able to listen to your favorite song, the ability to see, hear, and communicate is an often overlooked but crucially important part of our health.

Having communication disorders or challenges is more common than many think, and there at least 46 million people across the U.S. who have a hearing or other communication disorder. Communication disorders are not only common but also can require specialized treatment. Those with hearing, speech, or other communication disorders often benefit from targeted help, which is where the work of Speech-language Pathologists comes in.

At VNS Health, one of the nation’s largest nonprofit home- and community-based health care organizations, Speech-Language Pathologists play an important role in helping individuals with communication disorders stay healthy and thrive and increasing their patients’ ability to stay independent even in the face of these hurdles.

Whitney Thomas is a Speech-Language Pathologist at VNS Health, working in the New York City borough of Queens. Day in and day out she goes to people’s homes, serving a diverse set of patients experiencing communication challenges. Thomas works with an average caseload ranging from 20-30 patients at any given time, with everyone receiving specialized treatment depending on their diagnosis, the severity of their problems, and whether their condition is chronic or acute. With each patient she can spend anywhere from 40-60 minutes during each visit to their home. However, if their needs are more complicated or severe, she may need to devote more time

“I have a lot of stroke patients who have aphasia and can’t communicate, and also have feeding tubes because they’re not swallowing,” said Thomas. “So, I’ll usually see those patients more often—typically two or three times a week, and over a longer period.”

Speech-language pathologists work with patients with issues beyond the ability to speak, hear, and communicate, like those who struggle to eat and swallow.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association estimates that 1 in every 25 people will experience trouble swallowing (also known as Dysphagia) at least once, and 22% of those are 50 and older. Thomas says that for some of her patients, losing this ability can negatively affect their quality of life.

In one case, Thomas had a stroke patient recovering from COVID-19 who had been intubated for several months. When trouble swallowing led to depression, Thomas extended her time with the patient to provide extra support and reinforcement until the patient was able to achieve personal goals, complete exercise and regain the ability to swallow.

“When I did a second swallow study, my patient’s swallowing muscles were much stronger. Finally, eating was possible—not just purees, but regular solid food,” said Thomas.

“When we sat together for the first full meal, it was a happy time! To this day, the family sends me pictures of my patient eating.” Thomas says the inspiration her patients give her helps her continue her work in the field knowing she is making a difference in people’s lives.

To learn more about home health care rehabilitation services, please visit: [www.vnshealth.org](http://www.vnshealth.org) or call 1-866-986-7691.