

## Bronx Mental Health Nurse Takes Patient Care Where It's Needed Most



*By Emily Swanson, May 06, 2024*

Bronx resident John Tawiah did not have a typical job interview for his role as a behavioral health registered nurse with [VNS Health's Assertive Community Treatment \(ACT\) team](#).

During that interview about two and a half years ago, Tawiah, 45, was sent out to the streets with the team, funded by the state's Office of Mental Health, to meet someone in the midst of a psychiatric crisis.

"I had to decide then and there if I wanted to do this," he told the Bronx Times in an interview at the start of May, which is National Nurses' Month. Tawiah had previously worked in mental health care as a nurse's assistant, but this type of mobile work was new to him.

Fortunately, everything clicked during that interview.

"I think this is my calling," Tawiah remembered thinking at the time.

Since then, he has continued to visit patients in their homes throughout the borough and out on the streets — meeting vulnerable New Yorkers wherever they are.

Tawiah, 45, said the work with the "hospital on wheels" is very challenging. He said many of his patients do not have insurance and have not been helped by traditional means in the past. He deals mostly with people who cannot live safely in the community and often sees people at their worst — sometimes in the midst of psychotic episodes, often tied to substance abuse — and often has to return to the same place multiple times or call repeatedly to find his patients.

Tawiah's background also played a key role in helping him connect with diverse patients. He grew up in Ghana, emigrated to the United States about 20 years ago and lives in the Morris Park section of the Bronx. He sees a lot of patients who have something in common with him, which is key to gaining their trust.

"I think they are very very comfortable with me," he said.

### **'We need your help'**

"You have to be humble" in approaching people, said Tawiah, and building those relationships with patients makes the work gratifying.

"It makes you feel like you're making a change in their life," he said.

Tawiah said he easily gets invested in his patients' well-being. When he is in the office, he enjoys it when patients just stop by to talk when they don't have an appointment.

He recalled meeting a young girl with a mood disorder who was struggling with isolation, nightmares and a poor relationship with her mother. After getting on medications and working with staff, Tawiah said the girl is now receiving care regularly, getting along better with her mother and starting to form social relationships.

VNS Health runs several behavioral health programs for people of all ages throughout the Bronx. Their work includes school-based clinics, substance use treatment, geriatric mobile outreach, transitional care for those recently released from inpatient psychiatric units and more.

And although the work is unpredictable, Tawiah said he has never had major problems and has had "not a single incident" of violence from a patient. His line of work isn't for everyone, but for Tawiah, "This is something I plan to do for a long time," he said. "Maybe until retirement."

Tawiah wanted to share this message to Bronxites: don't give up on your family members or friends who need mental health care — even though they may be difficult to deal with. He hopes the whole community will work together to reduce the stigma about mental health treatment and to keep people with mental illness living at home as long as possible.

"We need your help," he said.

*The Bronx Times is a weekly newspaper serving Parkchester, Hunts Point, Fordham South, Grand Concourse, Fordham North, Bronx North and Co-Op City. Articles reach an estimated audience of 400,848 through print, web and social media.*