

**Frontline Honors Award Winner:**  
**Natalie Kovacs, Program Coordinator,**  
**Parachute Program, VNS Health**



*Jessica Longly, Mar 19, 2026*

Natalie Kovacs, Program Coordinator of the Parachute Program at VNS Health, has been named to the [Frontline Honors Awards](#) Class of 2025 by Behavioral Health Business.

To become a Frontline honoree, an individual is nominated by their peers. The candidate must be:

- A dedicated, high-performing frontline worker who delivers exceptional experiences and outcomes
- A passionate worker who knows how to put their vision into for the good of their respective industry, the patients and residents they serve, and their families
- An advocate for their industry and their fellow colleagues

Behavioral Health Business recently caught up with Kovacs to discuss her time in the behavioral health industry.

**BHB: What drew you to this industry?**

**Kovacs:** I've always been fascinated by mental health and psychology, largely because when I was growing up members of my own family struggled with mental illness — in some cases very serious mental illness. Hearing and seeing what they went through, and seeing how difficult it was for them to get the right care, made me want to understand why these things happen and how the brain works.

In college, I majored in both psychology and art, which are two fields that, in different ways, help you step inside someone else's mind. After graduating, I worked in arts education, but I felt something was missing. I wanted to do work that made a deeper impact.

That led me to working in suicide prevention. The work felt meaningful to me because people often reached out when they felt they had no one else. What so many of them needed was someone to listen, validate their feelings, and remind them that they mattered. As someone who had had their own medical challenges, it really resonated with me on a personal level, and it was rewarding to be able to help others.

Eventually, I went to graduate school for social work. While working on an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team through the NYC Mental Health Service Corps, I realized how rewarding working with adults with serious mental illness, such as psychosis, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, truly is. This is a population that is often misunderstood and dismissed, even though they're wonderful, valuable people.

When the program ended, I joined VNS Health working in the Parachute Program, which provides in-home counseling, medication management, crisis intervention, and care management for adults who have a history of multiple psychiatric hospitalizations and/or poor engagement with past behavioral health treatment options. What I love most about Parachute is that I get to build trust and support around people who often feel alone, and help them reconnect with a system they may have once mistrusted.

**BHB: What's a misconception you had about this work before you started – and how has reality differed?**

**Kovacs:** Before I started, I thought the histories of the people we serve would define how “hard” they'd be to work with. You read an intake listing multiple hospitalizations, episodes, crises, and it can feel overwhelming. You think, “How could I possibly help this person? This feels insurmountable.”

But when you meet people, connect with them, and understand their story, everything shifts. Progress rarely comes from one big breakthrough. It comes from many small moments: one conversation, one solution, one step at a time. All those small things add up.

I sometimes explain our work with a metaphor: our clients often come to us with a “pile of tangled necklaces.” Their lives and challenges are knotted together in ways that feel impossible to undo. Our job isn't to yank the knot apart, it's to patiently help untangle things, thread by thread, until they can move forward. Many people look only at the tangle. We look at what's possible once you start working through it.

**BHB: Was there a moment in your career when you realized, “This work really matters”? What happened?**

**Kovacs:** One of the first clients I worked with in Parachute had been through more than most people could imagine. She was younger, had survived a severe domestic violence relationship, had moved downstate, and was living with her abuser's family. She had no family in the city, no support system, and was constantly in and out of the hospital. She genuinely believed there was no way out.

Working with her required time, patience, and continuous persistence, but it was worth it. Over time, with the right treatment, support and care, she went back to school, moved to a safer home, got a job at a summer camp, and slowly rebuilt her life. She discovered purpose again. She realized she had a future.

To witness someone move from feeling completely trapped to seeing their own possibilities — that was when it hit me: this work genuinely changes lives.

**BHB: What's the most valuable skill you've developed on the front lines that people often overlook?**

**Kovacs:** Meeting people where they're at, genuinely and without pressure, is incredibly important in this work. Sometimes the most impactful thing you can do is show up with an open heart and simply be present. Not every session needs a checklist or a “goal accomplished.” Some days, you're just sitting with someone, talking, or hanging out for a bit. Those moments build trust and rapport, and that foundation is what leads to real progress over time. To do this work well, it's important to remember that you have to show up as a person, not just a worker.

**BHB: What's one decision leaders make that has a bigger impact on frontline workers than they might realize?**

**Kovacs:** Accountability means everything. When leaders say, “We're going to make this change,” frontline teams need to hear concrete next steps and see follow-through. When that communication doesn't come, it

can be incredibly challenging, especially in this work, where so much depends on coordination, clarity, and consistency. Even small lapses in communication at a leadership level can ripple out and create big obstacles for frontline staff.

**BHB: What's a simple change – policy, tool, or mindset – that would make frontline work more effective?**

**Kovacs:** Open, streamlined communication, especially across agencies and systems, would make such a meaningful difference for clinicians and those we serve. The behavioral health and social service systems are incredibly complex. Our clients often move in and out of shelters or locations, and every move can mean a loss of documents, disruption to benefits, or a sudden and unexpected change in providers. We see situations where we help our clients finally connect with a therapist or medication provider, only for a shelter transfer to then force them to start over again, sometimes overnight. Even something as basic as replacing a Social Security card can become an enormous barrier to getting someone the help they desperately need in that moment. It creates instability and unnecessary chaos.

Better interagency communication and coordination on city, state, and federal levels would make things significantly easier not only for clinicians, but especially for the clients who are already navigating so much.

**BHB: What gives you optimism about the future of this industry, despite its challenges?**

**Kovacs:** The people who do this work make me optimistic for the future of care. Our team here at VNS Health is incredibly passionate, dedicated, and caring. They show up every day for people who have been overlooked, dismissed, or pushed out of traditional healthcare systems. If we can change the lives of the small number of people in our program, I believe there are others across the city doing the same.

I'm also optimistic because behavioral health home care, while still rare in many communities, is deeply needed. Most people don't even know this kind of care exists. But meeting people where they are, supporting them in their homes and communities, and helping them avoid harmful or destabilizing situations is essential in today's world.

After the pandemic, you can definitely see that people are lonelier now. Many of our clients are more fearful of leaving their homes today, making engagement harder. But that just underscores how important this work is, and how many opportunities there are to make a meaningful difference.

We often blame individuals for being "non-compliant" or "falling through the cracks," when the truth is that systems are often what's at fault, or the services these individuals needed simply aren't accessible. They needed help and didn't receive it. The more opportunities there are to expand community-based and home-based behavioral health care, the more people we can reach before they end up in crisis.

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