

BRONX*Times*

‘You saved my life’: How One Bronx Social Worker Helps Transgender Patients Recover with Dignity



Asha Lyons, a Brooklyn-born, Bronx-based social worker, has supported nearly 1,000 patients through recovery after gender-affirming surgery.

By Kylie Clifton, Mar 31, 2026

When Asha Lyons speaks to her patients, many of them tell her the same thing: “You saved my life.”

Lyons hears it often. Sometimes at the end of a long recovery. Sometimes in moments of fear, when a patient is alone at home after gender-affirming surgery, unsure of what comes next.

“They say, ‘You are an angel,’” Lyons said. A social worker with VNS Health’s [Gender Affirmation Program](#), Lyons supports patients through a vulnerable period in recovery.

March 31 marks Transgender Day of Visibility, a day that highlights the lives and contributions of transgender people. For Lyons, visibility is not abstract. It is measured in care, in presence and in whether someone has support when they need it most.

Lyons, who was born and raised in Brooklyn and now lives in the Bronx, has been part of the transgender community and its support networks since she was a teenager.

She transitioned at 16, when support systems for transgender people were limited. By her early 20s, she was already leading support groups and doing public health work for other transgender people.

“I know what it’s like to struggle with internalized transphobia,” she said. “We think nobody will care for us.”

That understanding has followed her throughout her life and into her current role.

In 2020, Lyons underwent gender-affirming surgery, an experience she describes as the most life-changing moment of her life. But at the time, she had limited support.



Asha Lyons (right) embraces a former client during a meetup with patients she supported through VNS Health's Gender Affirmation Program

"I didn't have anyone who showed me the way," she said. "I'm happy to be that for others."

Now, through VNS Health, a nonprofit provider of home and community-based care with more than 130 years of history, Lyons supports patients across New York City and as far as Albany.

Each year, she works with roughly 130 to 200 patients. Over the past four years, that number has reached nearly 1,000.

The Gender Affirmation Program, now in its 10th year, has served more than 5,000 New Yorkers recovering at home after surgery. It is one of the few programs in the country focused on home-based care for transgender and nonbinary patients after surgery.

For Lyons, much of the work focuses on needs outside of medical care.

"Some people are recovering without any help," she said. "How am I going to eat? If my pills fall on the floor, how am I going to reach it?"

Her patients often face food insecurity, unsafe housing conditions and transportation barriers. Some travel alone to follow-up appointments while still healing. Others have no consistent caregiver.

Lyons helps fill those gaps by directly connecting patients to essentials like food, transportation and household supplies.

Her approach blends lived experience with professional care in a way that resonates deeply with patients.

"They don't have anyone else who's been through this," Lyons said. "Being able to share both the personal and the professional changes everything."



Asha Lyons (right), who serves as vice president of the Bronx Borough President's LGBTQ+ Task Force, with Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson (left).

Many of her patients see her as more than a social worker.

"I sometimes joke that I'm the mother of gender-affirming care in New York City," Lyons said.

Her colleagues say that connection is what makes her work stand out.

"As a clinician, one of the things that makes Asha so exceptional at this work is her ability to draw from a deep well of empathy," said Dr. Shannon Whittington, clinical director of the Gender Affirmation Program.

"For many of those we serve, it may be the first time they've felt respected or understood by the health care system."

Lyons was recently named VNS Health's 2026 Social Services Professional of the Year, an honor she did not expect.

"I'm just doing what is a calling," she said.

Outside of her clinical work, Lyons serves as vice president of the Bronx Borough President's LGBTQ+ Task Force, where she helps advocate for expanded access to affirming care across the city. She is also pursuing a doctorate in social work at Tulane University, where her research focuses on gender-affirming care.

Still, she says the work remains urgent.

"We don't want to go back to what life used to look like for trans people," Lyons said.

On Transgender Day of Visibility, Lyons hopes people look beyond visibility itself and consider what it means to truly support transgender lives.

"There are people who care about you," she said. "People who are looking out for you, even when you don't see it."

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