

In Brooklyn, Nursing Means Showing Up Wherever We're Needed



Op-Ed: It's no exaggeration to say that nurses meet people wherever they are.

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An East New York native, I caught the caregiver bug at an early age and soon found my way into a nursing career that allowed me to provide care for people right in their homes. I remember meeting one of my first patients, a homebound older woman, and discovering her grandson was in preschool with my son and that we attended the same church. It felt like caring for someone in my own family!

That feeling has stayed with me ever since. Being a nurse became more than helping one person heal, it became a way to give back to my neighbors.

I'm not alone in this feeling. Nearly all the nurses I've met chose this path because we want to help, and that's where we feel most rewarded. However, I'd like to take a moment to spotlight the thousands of community and home health nurses across New York who play an incredibly important—though often lesser-known—role in supporting our neighbors.

Brooklyn relies on these nurses. Delivering care in walkups, basement apartments, shelters, even bus stops, they prevent avoidable hospitalizations by building trust and reaching out to people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. It is a kind of caregiving, rooted in being there when and where they're needed, no matter the circumstances.

Today, I'm a Behavioral Health Nurse with the [VNS Health](#) Brooklyn Assertive Community Treatment team. We work with an especially underserved population: adults living with severe mental illness who have often cycled through emergency rooms and psychiatric hospitals, and who may also be dealing with substance use disorders or co-occurring physical health conditions.

It's no exaggeration to say that we meet people wherever they are. That might mean delivering medication to an unhoused patient in Maria Hernandez Park, meeting a client in Greenpoint and then traveling to another client in Bay Ridge on a single afternoon (during rush hour!). Where we're needed, we go.

One client I was caring for came to me at a moment when he felt there was little hope for his future. Though barely in his 30s, he had already endured a lifetime of challenges and hurt. He had just returned from Rikers, his latest stay after years of repeated arrests.

As I got to know him, I quickly realized that many of the incidents that led him down this path were tied to years of struggling with untreated mental illness. He was used to people who only saw him on the surface: a list of transgressions and reports, not a person. I let him know early on that I wasn't just there to help him stay on track with mental health treatment. My team and I were there to help him become the person he was trying so hard to be.

Knowing we had his back, he became more committed. He kept his medication appointments, attended therapy and support groups, and even let go of markers from his old life, like removing an old gang tattoo. As he grew more stable, that progress spilled over into his personal life. He built positive relationships with friends and family and became a devoted father.

Eventually, he became so self-sufficient that he no longer needed support from me and his VNS Health care team. Saying goodbye was not sad or bittersweet, it was a reminder that truly being there for someone can change lives.

What I've learned, like many nurses, is that health and success are not always straightforward journeys. Goalposts change, and the journey is harder when friends and family don't understand mental illness or hold on to hurtful stigmas.

I've been with many of my clients for years, getting to know their hopes, dreams, and challenges. While the hard days are tough, the wins, however small, are what keep me going. A client may not be taking their medication, but if they're meeting with us every week and talking to us, that's progress. Those conversations reveal so much about someone, and they help us find a path to healing that respects their experiences.

Much of what home and community health care nurses do is let people know they are heard, that we are here to help, and that wherever they are on their journey, they're not alone. I know the many challenges people in Brooklyn face, but I also know how care can help and heal.

Marie Tisi is a Behavioral Health Nurse at home and community health nonprofit [VNS Health](#).

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