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NEWS FROM THE VISITING NURSE SERVICE OF NEW YORK

## VNSNY Study Finds Home Health Care Helps COVID-19 Recovery

A ground-breaking study by VNSNY's Center for Home Care Policy & Research has found that when patients return home after being hospitalized for COVID-19, most are still reeling from the effects of their illness. But the researchers also found these patients' symptoms and daily functioning improved significantly after several weeks of home health care, and that most went on to recover without a hospital readmission.

The study, published in late November in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, looked at 1,409 VNSNY Home Care patients with COVID-19 who were referred to VNSNY by over 60 different hospitals from April through mid-June of 2020, with outcomes followed through mid-September.

"When these patients came on service for home care, they were very sick and debilitated," says Kathryn Bowles, PhD, Professor and van Ameringen Chair in Nursing Excellence at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the VNSNY Research Center. At the start of home care, half of the COVID-19 patients reported extreme exhaustion, 84% had trouble breathing during exertion, and 42% experienced daily or constant pain. The newly discharged patients also needed help with six activities of daily living, on average.

After several weeks of home care, which included regular nursing visits as well as physical therapy, patients depended on others for help with an average of just one daily activity. Subjects also showed significant improvements in pain levels, shortness of breath, alertness, and anxiety. Ultimately, 88% of



VNSNY researchers found that newly discharged COVID-19 patients improved significantly with home-based care—and that 90% were able to avoid hospital readmission as a result.



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## VNSNY Vaccinates Staff Against COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued its mid-winter resurgence in the New York area, VNSNY began 2021 with the launch of a large-scale program to administer Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to its patient-facing employees and other staff, as called for by New York State guidelines. At the same time, with VNSNY Home Care's caseload of COVID-19 patients increasing, the organization is keeping a sharp focus on maintaining its PPE inventory and adhering closely to all COVID-19 protective protocols.

"We're pushing full speed ahead to vaccinate everyone among our field staff who wants it, including our 7,000 Partners in Care home health aides, as well as other groups of staff as they become eligible," says Dan Savitt, VNSNY's new President and CEO. By the end of January, several thousand staff members had received their first dose of the vaccine and were on track to get their second doses in the weeks that followed.

Andria Castellanos, Executive Vice President and Chief of Provider Services, credits the vaccination program's smooth rollout to a robust planning process that began last autumn. "We set clear goals early on, then worked to meet them," she explains. Staff education played a key role in the process: Realizing that having enough

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## Also in this issue:

- CHOICE MAP Plan Earns First-Ever CMS 4-Star Rating
- VNSNY Merges Its Contact Centers for a Better Consumer and Customer Experience

## An Interview with VNSNY's New President and CEO

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**What are your thoughts as you move into the CEO position?**

I'm looking forward to it! For the past six months, Marki Flannery and I have worked on a transition plan with the rest of our

Executive Leadership Team, charting a course for the next two years. I'm excited at the prospect of working with our leadership and the rest of the company to advance VNSNY's mission, and ensure that we're well-positioned in today's fast-changing healthcare environment.

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After several weeks of home care, which included regular nursing visits as well as physical therapy, patients depended on others for help with an average of just one daily activity. Subjects also showed significant improvements in pain levels, shortness of breath, alertness, and anxiety. Ultimately, 88% of the COVID-19 patients completed their episode of home care without any adverse events and only 10% required readmission to the hospital.

One of the study's take-aways is that, up to this point, home health care has been a largely underutilized resource nationally when it comes to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. "According to a report by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, only 11% of discharged COVID-19 patients in the U.S. have been getting home care services on their return home," explains Dr. Bowles. "Referring more COVID-19 patients to home care could help relieve the burden on hospitals by allowing them to discharge COVID-19 patients more readily, while at the same time optimizing these patients' recovery."



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# VNSNY Vaccinates Staff Against COVID-19

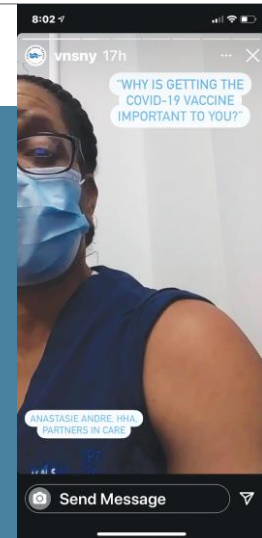
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Andria Castellanos, Executive Vice President and Chief of Provider Services, credits the vaccination program's smooth rollout to a robust planning process that began last autumn. "We set clear goals early on, then worked to meet them," she explains. Staff education played a key role in the process: Realizing that having enough clinical staff available to inject the vaccine would be a key logistical factor, VNSNY swiftly set up a process for training dozens of clinicians to safely and efficiently administer the vaccine to staff members, while also preparing a communications campaign to inform the rest of its workforce about the vaccine's safety and efficacy profile.

*To reassure their co-workers of the COVID vaccine's safety, VNSNY staff are recording "selfie" videos of their vaccine experiences and posting the videos online.*

"WHY IS GETTING THE COVID-19 VACCINE IMPORTANT TO YOU?"



"We've used several different avenues to help reassure staff about potential side effects and encourage them to get vaccinated," says Castellanos. "These include regular conference calls, written and video presentations from trusted medical sources, and messages from our own employees, explaining why they're getting vaccinated and then reporting on the experience afterwards."

"As VNSNY deals with the COVID-19 resurgence in coordination with our hospital and physician partners, our greatest concern is for the safety of our patients and the staff who care for them every day," adds Tony Dawson, VNSNY's Vice President of Quality and Customer Experience. "In addition to vaccinating our staff, we're meeting regularly to review the latest guidance from the CDC and the New York State Department of Health. We're also closely following the COVID-19 protocols we developed early in the pandemic, and we continue to update these as needed to meet changing requirements. Whatever happens in the weeks ahead, we'll be ready."



# An Interview with VNSNY's New President and CEO

*Dan Savitt discusses his vision for the Visiting Nurse Service of New York*

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## **What are your thoughts as you move into the CEO position?**

I'm looking forward to it! For the past six months, Marki Flannery and I have worked on a transition plan with the rest of our Executive Leadership Team, charting a course for the next two years. I'm excited at the prospect of working with our leadership and the rest of the company to advance VNSNY's mission, and ensure that we're well-positioned in today's fast-changing healthcare environment.

## **How would you describe VNSNY's goals going forward?**

Our immediate goal is that we're focused on administering COVID-19 vaccine to our staff. It's a big effort and it's going well: Since receiving our first shipment of Moderna vaccine in early January, we've been vaccinating 1,000 employees per week. In the longer term, our objective is to grow in a way that adds value to the populations we serve.

## **Can you elaborate on that?**

For VNSNY to be successful, we have to continue developing new products and services and reaching more people with them. As a not-for-profit, we can't compete with the major health plans and private equity firms as far as pouring capital into innovation. Instead, we need to focus on delivering value to the consumer, providing high-quality care, and having an engaged workforce. Within that framework, we need to leverage our strengths—which include our care management expertise, our diverse in-home workforce, our health plans, and our digital capabilities.

## **How will care management impact the way VNSNY delivers care?**

We want consumers to see us as an organization that can support them across the full continuum of care. Our new line of care management services, VNSNY Care360° Solutions, can be a vehicle for this. It uses value-based contracts with health plans to manage their most vulnerable members' care. We'd like to leverage this capability to coordinate our full range of in-home services that have been siloed in the past, including medical care, home health aide services, and social, behavioral and mental health support.

## **What do you envision for VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans?**

I'm excited about what we've done with CHOICE and where we're headed. Again, we want to grow that business by helping to support consumers with complex issues. We're going to continue concentrating on integrated Medicare-Medicaid products—which we're already doing successfully with our CHOICE Total Medicaid Advantage Plus plan—and we want to get more involved in a targeted way with Medicare Advantage. Our focus on quality has been critical to CHOICE's success—

*Continued on next slide.*



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including our ability to analyze claims and get that information to the people who monitor and coordinate care for plan members. Of course, state and federal budget issues remain a pressure, especially regarding Medicaid MLTC, which is why we need to diversify. We can't continue to be primarily an MLTC plan.

## **How do IT and data analytics fit into all this?**

If you're going to be a successful healthcare company, you have to be good at IT and analytics, and we're very good at both. We've completely transformed our IT function in recent years, moving from data centers and mainframes to the cloud. Our world-class data analytics team in conjunction with our clinical operations is now leveraging that technology to support our patients and plan members, and we're going to continue investing in this area.

## **Do you also see growth opportunities for VNSNY's hospice program?**

Absolutely. I believe our hospice program can maintain a growth trajectory of 5 to 10% a year and maybe even better, depending on how we execute. Hospice is underutilized in New York, so we need to keep building awareness of its end-of-life benefits through programs like our Project HOPE in Harlem and the Bronx. And we need to stay focused on delivering high-quality care. When you do that as a hospice, you grow.

## **Finally, where do you see VNSNY's Community Mental Health Services (CMHS) headed?**

CMHS runs many terrific initiatives, mostly grant-funded, that offer vital mental health services to a vulnerable population. I know there's an opportunity to leverage these to create new managed care products. As I said

earlier, our consumers need an integrated set of medical, behavioral and social services. The challenges people experience around mental health are difficult to navigate, and result in high costs for health plans. Integrating CMHS into our care management services would be a great way to address this important need.

# VNSNY's Data Analytics Team Plays Key Role in New Medicaid Reimbursement Model

New York State's current risk-adjustment payment model for Medicaid managed long-term care (MLTC) plans, which took effect last fall, does a better job than previous models of accounting for the actual health status of MLTC plan members—particularly frail Medicaid recipients with numerous comorbidities. That's due in no small part to the contributions of VNSNY's Business Intelligence and Analytics (BIA) division.

"Basically, sicker plan members need more services," explains Tim Peng, VNSNY's Chief Data Analytics Officer, who heads the BIA group. "Under the old model, mission-driven not-for-profit insurers like VNSNY CHOICE were in a difficult position, because our MLTC population tends to have more complex health issues and severe disabilities than other Medicaid plans—yet our Medicaid reimbursement levels didn't reflect this reality."

As a first step toward fixing the problem, Peng and his BIA team conducted a series of analyses looking at service utilization and reimbursement levels across the VNSNY CHOICE MLTC membership. Among other things, the team found that members who required ventilators, suffered from Alzheimer's or dementia, and/or required more than 12 hours of care per day typically had costs of care that weren't adequately recognized in the existing risk-adjustment model.

Based on their findings, the BIA team presented eight categories of recommended changes to the New York State Department of Health (DOH) and its actuary, Deloitte. The state went on to incorporate seven of these eight recommendation sets into the design of its new model.

"At the end of the day, our goal was straightforward: We wanted to better align the state's long-term care payment policies with the costs of those members who need the most care," says Peng. "To do that, we used our data to look at our members and the pattern of costs and services needed to care for them safely at home, then figured out what wasn't working."



*With the help of analysis by VNSNY's Business Intelligence and Analytics division, New York State has implemented a new reimbursement model that more accurately reflects the health status of Medicaid recipients.*

In recognition of his team's work, Peng was honored by the United Hospital Fund (UHF) as a recipient of its 2020 Excellence in Health Care Award, presented at a virtual event last July. Peng is quick to point out that the UHF award reflects the intensive work of a broad group of staff across VNSNY, including his own BIA team as well as colleagues at VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans, VNSNY's Government Affairs (GA) department, and other areas of the organization. "The project was a truly collective effort that could not have succeeded without the efforts of many people," he says.

The project's impact can also be credited in part to VNSNY's close working relationship with the New York State Department of Health. "VNSNY has a strong partnership with DOH, and we are always looking for opportunities to collaborate on issues where we can provide value and where our recommendations support sound public policy," notes Ann Mary Ferrie, Associate Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy at VNSNY, who led GA's participation in the project. "This was a clear example of that alignment."

## VNSNY CHOICE MAP Plan Earns First-Ever CMS 4-Star Rating



In October, the VNSNY CHOICE Total health insurance plan received its first-ever 4-Star rating from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for 2021. The 4-Star rating was achieved in CMS's annual Medicare Star Ratings Program, which evaluates Medicare health and prescription drug plans on a scale of 1 to 5 Stars based on nearly 50 clinical, administrative and customer satisfaction measures.

CHOICE Total is an integrated Medicaid Advantage Plus (MAP) plan that offers Medicare and Medicaid benefits in a single, combined coverage package. "Of the ten MAP plans in New York State, CHOICE Total was one of just two to be awarded 4 Stars," says Lori Ferguson, Senior Vice President for CHOICE Long Term Integrated Plans.

Factors cited by Ferguson as contributing to the 4-Star rating include the plan's well-run operations and its seamless integration of Medicare and Medicaid benefits. "CHOICE Total members experience the two programs as one entity," she notes. "Members have one insurance card, one provider network, and one phone number to call if they have questions about their plan."

"CHOICE Total's 4-Star rating reflects the tremendous progress achieved by our team over the past two years," adds Dr. Hany Abdelaal, President of VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans. With over 3,000 members, the plan is currently New York State's second-largest MAP product.



# To Help Reduce Health Disparities, VNSNY Launches Community Collaborations Initiative

From a virtual chair-exercise class in English and Spanish and a workshop on low-cost insurance options presented in Chinese, to an online classical music concert and a free legal clinic on housing issues in partnership with Manhattan Legal Services, VNSNY is involved in a wide range of community events—some hosted by VNSNY itself, others sponsored by elected officials or community organizations with VNSNY providing community resources and expert staff.



*Last fall, as part of its community outreach, VNSNY's Chinatown Community Center worked with the Chinese American Medical Society to distribute 20,000 facemasks to local residents.*

Since its founding in 1893, VNSNY has always had a strong community presence. But this outreach effort is now getting a boost, thanks to VNSNY's new Community Collaborations initiative. The initiative features an online hub where VNSNY's business lines and programs can share information about community events they are participating in or hosting, providing a platform for staff members to learn about what VNSNY is doing in the community as well as a listing of presentations and workshops that VNSNY currently offers to the community.

One important goal of Community Collaborations is to boost health literacy and address health disparities by helping VNSNY nurture its relationships with marginalized populations and the community-based organizations that serve them. To support this goal, the initiative is also preparing to launch a companion web page for the public. That web page will include a community calendar of health-related events and a portal for communicating with VNSNY, making it easier for community groups to learn about VNSNY's offerings and request customized presentations or workshops for their particular groups.

As Executive Vice President and Chief Experience Officer Michael Bernstein notes, cultivating community ties in the New York City area is key to VNSNY's continued success. "Strengthening community support and awareness is one of our main strategic goals," explains Bernstein. "VNSNY's relationships in the communities we serve are central to our mission of improving the health and well-being of our patients and members. These relationships also fuel positive perceptions of VNSNY, helping us to grow and meet our business objectives."

Besides benefiting community members, Community Collaborations is also elevating the engagement of VNSNY's staff. "By allowing staff to share and leverage their valuable knowledge and community contacts, this forum helps strengthen these connections across VNSNY's business lines and programs," says Community Relations Manager Melissa Henry, who is managing the initiative for VNSNY's Government Affairs team. "Ultimately, that will enable us to develop new relationships and sources of business for the future."

# VNSNY Merges Its Contact Centers for a Better Consumer and Customer Experience

To Dan Wallis, Vice President of VNSNY's newest department, Contact Center Shared Services (CCSS), the contact centers for VNSNY's various service lines "are the front door to our entire organization." When a patient, health plan member, client, family member, referral source, provider or any other business partner reaches out to one of these centers, he notes, it's often their first interaction with VNSNY. For the past 10 months, Wallis has been leading a team that's taking this front door experience to the next level, by consolidating VNSNY's many contact centers into a single entity.

"We are focused on ways to improve the experience consumers have with VNSNY," says Michael Bernstein, VNSNY's Executive Vice President and Chief Experience Officer. "Our long-term goal is to offer a consumer experience that exceeds their expectations. At the same time, we want to make it easier for vendors, partners, payers and others to do business with us. CCSS lays the foundation for achieving these goals."

In practice, this has meant bringing together nearly 300 employees with a diverse range of disciplines and skills, who collectively handle 120,000 calls a month on everything from insurance eligibility and coverage to scheduling and clinical care. Since arriving at VNSNY last March, Wallis has moved swiftly, leveraging his prior experience at Kaiser Permanente in California, where he oversaw a 24/7 contact center serving nearly five million customers. As of early 2021, a number of VNSNY's largest contact centers have now been incorporated into CCSS, including those serving VNSNY Home Care, VNSNY Hospice, VNSNY's licensed home care services agency Partners in Care, and VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans.

In addition to managing this structural change, Wallis is also focused on empowering the CCSS staff with the best possible communications technology. "Our vision is to improve the experience for everyone who contacts VNSNY," he says. "Our new unified structure is helping us do that by enabling us to access the latest tools and specialized training for contact center staff."

In December, CCSS rolled out a new, state-of-the-art telephony platform, and a sophisticated chat function will be introduced later this year. Long-range, the plan is to use customer relationship management software so that contact center agents will be able to see each consumer's complete history with VNSNY on one screen, providing all relevant information needed to best serve that consumer right at that moment.

"A key part of our vision at CCSS is what we call first contact resolution," Wallis explains. "Many of our consumers get services from more than one part of VNSNY, so we want them to be able to make a single phone call or email outreach and get help with any questions they have. For that to happen, our agents need to have complete information about every client the minute they contact us, and be able to say, 'I see you called yesterday about X and last week about Y.'"

The ultimate aim is for customers to have "a frictionless experience," adds Wallis. "We want them to come away thinking: 'VNSNY knows me, and understands my needs.'"



*VNSNY's new Contact Center Shared Services brings together all the contact centers for the organization's different service lines. To provide consumers and customers with "a frictionless experience," contact center staff are also getting state-of-the-art technology and specialized training.*

## VNSNY Launches Home Care Program for Military Veterans

Chris Webster, a medically retired Army medic, knows how transformative it can be to reach out to a fellow military veteran in need. Years ago, as part of a professional outreach, Webster connected with a homeless veteran who'd been living in the Long Island woods for two decades. The two built a relationship that resulted in the client connecting with the Veterans Administration (VA) and getting the benefits and services he needed, including stable housing.



*As the head of VNSNY Home Care's veterans program, Chris Webster—a medically retired vet himself—makes sure veterans get the care they need and the benefits they're entitled to. "One thing you learn in the military is that you don't leave your brothers and sisters behind," he says.*

"He got out of the woods and back on his feet, and today he's thriving," says Webster. "He didn't want help at first, because people had made too many broken promises. But I introduced myself as a fellow veteran, a peer, a brother. And one thing you learn in the military is that you don't leave your brothers and sisters behind."

Today, Webster is utilizing those same outreach skills as the Veteran Liaison for VNSNY's new Home Care Veterans program. Begun in June 2020 with a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation, the program identifies veterans who have been referred to VNSNY Home Care and ensures they receive home care tailored to their specific status as veterans, as well as the benefits they're entitled to. Since the program's launch last year, it has enhanced home care services for more than 900 veterans.

"My job involves working with VNSNY clinicians and staff to raise their awareness of veterans' needs, and then helping to get those needs met," Webster explains. This can entail enrolling patients into the VA system from scratch, or securing additional benefits for those already enrolled—including home health aide services, assistance with durable medical equipment or electronics, and access to primary or specialty physician care.

As with that veteran living in the Long Island woods, building trust has been key to the new program's success. "We veterans are—I'm told—a very stubborn, guarded bunch," says Webster, who has been working professionally with veterans since his discharge in 2012. "I start by telling them that I, too, am a disabled vet. From there I can communicate with them on a peer level, and they can focus on getting better and getting healthy, which is what home care is for."