

Addressing Homelessness, One Person at a Time

Violet's* story is all too familiar to New Yorkers: At age 34, she lives in a New York City subway station, where she struggles with depression, heroin addiction and several serious medical conditions. The city has thousands of people living in similar circumstances, but for VNS Health's Intensive Mobile Treatment (IMT) program, Violet is more than just a statistic—she's a client and, while it may not look like it at first glance, she is on the road to a better life.

“The aim of our IMT teams is to cultivate relationships with unhoused individuals, then help them gradually move to a better place,” says Deirdre DeLeo, Director, Behavioral Health Programs. “In Violet's case, she would barely speak to our team members at first. We kept at it, though, and eventually she opened up.”

As she came to trust them, Violet began accepting help from the IMT team members and from a partnering community organization, the Bowery Residents' Committee. These wrap-around services included availability of a “Safe Haven” bed whenever she chose to use it, opioid-reversing medication and fentanyl testing kits to lower her risk of overdosing, a phone so she could stay in touch with the IMT team, and access to medical supplies. Violet also agreed to see several doctors for her medical conditions, began the application process for housing and other benefits, and is taking steps to address her heroin addiction.

Violet's story is not an isolated case: New York City's IMT program has several dozen IMT teams active across its five boroughs, run by various organizations with city funding. VNS Health has a contract to administer five such teams in Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens. Each VNS Health team has 27 clients at any given time. They have been so successful that New York City recently agreed to fund two additional VNS Health IMT teams in the coming year—bringing the total IMT clients served to nearly 200 in all.

With homelessness now reaching a crisis point in New York City, the IMT program is just one of the many ways VNS Health is addressing the problem, notes Jessica Fear, VNS Health's Senior Vice President for Behavioral Health. "Our Health Home program for individuals with chronic mental illness and substance use disorders also has homeless clients," she says. "And our Assertive Community Treatment program, which provides treatment for people with severe mental illness, has a branch dedicated to clients in the city's shelter system."

VNS Health's homeless outreach extends to its health plans as well. SelectHealth, the organization's special needs plan, provides Medicaid benefits to individuals residing in New York City-operated shelters and other shelter systems, as well as those who are unsheltered and living on the street. The plan utilizes outreach teams that seek out plan members wherever they may be, ensuring they stay connected to the plan's specialized network of care providers.

"The key takeaway from all of these programs," says Patricia Kissi, who heads the IMT program for VNS Health, "is that people who are unhoused and living with mental health conditions require interventions by community-based teams with deep behavioral health expertise and a commitment to working

with clients over an extended period. The more funding that's provided for efforts like these, the more success we'll have in moving people to stable housing."

** The client's name has been changed for privacy.*