

VNS Health to Provide Bereavement Counseling for Children Impacted by Pandemic-Related Loss

VNS Health's Behavioral Health team launched a new support program this spring for children in the Bronx who have lost a caregiver during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program, funded by a grant from Affinity Legacy, Inc., will provide bereavement counseling to children from 5 to 18 years of age who had a primary caregiver, such as a parent or grandparent, pass away over the course of the pandemic.

"It's estimated that over 140,000 children in the U.S. have lost a primary caregiver due to a COVID-related death," says Tara Noto, a Vice President on VNS Health's Behavioral Health team. "The Bronx was especially hard-hit—so we wanted to develop a program that can leverage our presence there to support impacted children."

The new program will be spearheaded by two therapists skilled at working with children affected by grief and loss. Services will be provided either in-person or telephonically out of VNS Health's Outpatient Mental Health Clinic in the South Bronx.

"The therapists will employ some combination of individual, family, and group therapy, using evidence-based models such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and grief-trauma interventions," explains Patricia Kissi, Director of Behavioral Health Programs for VNS Health. When children are discharged from the program, they'll be linked with ongoing care in the community, Kissi notes, and their families will also be connected with social support services as needed.

The program aims to treat 50 to 75 youngsters in its first

year. Prospective clients will be identified by reaching out to schools, churches and other local organizations, as well as through existing Behavioral Health programs. "We'll also be using social and print media and holding workshops and parent meetings to publicize the program," says Kissi.

"Children in the Bronx have experienced a lot of loss from COVID, and we can see them struggling," adds Noto. "This is a really important opportunity to provide therapeutic and supportive services to these children and help them transition to a better place."