Disturbed by conditions she found on New York’s Lower East Side at the turn of the century, Lillian Wald founded the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNS) in 1893. This innovation marked the birth of public health nursing in the United States. A social reformer and registered nurse, Wald also established New York’s first public playground, the first school study hall, and the first special-education class for the handicapped. She lobbied successfully for school lunches and for nurses in the public schools. The powers-that-were called her “that nurse-troublemaker”.

Today, under president and chief executive officer Carol Raphael, VNS is the largest non-profit provider of home health care in the United States, making more than two million home visits a year. In 1993, VNS provided more than US$ 10 million in free care to the uninsured and the indigent.

VNS has nearly 5000 employees. Nurses, home health aides, rehabilitation therapists, psychiatrists, physicians, social workers and case workers provide essential services to tens of thousands of the most vulnerable New Yorkers, from newborns to senior citizens (VNS serves 53 New Yorkers who are at least 100 years old), from HIV-infected children to terminally ill patients seeking the dignity and comfort of being cared for at home.

VNS is noted for its innovative programmes. Its First Steps Programme provides comprehensive services to substance-abusing women who are pregnant or have very young children. It delivers health care at several public schools (with the Children’s Aid Society), and its paediatric asthma programme prevents the unnecessary, costly hospitalization of children. The agency is the single largest provider of home health care to people with AIDS in the United States. VNS provides mental health services for the homeless, and counselling to survivors of tragedies like the World Trade Center bombing. It provides free influenza vaccinations to the elderly (with the NYC Department of Health). Its “Nursing Home Without Walls” serves the chronically ill elderly at home. VNS is one of just four groups in the United States to receive Federal funds for studying how community nursing care can improve the health of the elderly.

VNS’s new Research Center will help to answer other key questions: How can home care provide better outcomes for patients? How can it be made more efficient?

In House on Henry Street, Lillian Wald wrote, “The call to the nurse is not only for the bedside care of the sick, but to help in seeking out the deep-lying basic cause of illness and misery, that in the future there may be less sickness to nurse and to cure.” VNS today continues Lillian Wald’s legacy.

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