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How Visiting Nurse Services in Westchester is taking personal safety to the next level

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About a year ago, Timothy Leddy, president and CEO of Visiting Nurse Services in Westchester, saw a technology company on LinkedIn that piqued his interest. The Peace of Mind Co. was looking to expand the use of its POM personal safety devices from college campuses to health care settings. Leddy wanted to help home care workers feel safer on the job.

To meet both objectives, Leddy and POM Co-Founder and President Andrew Leahy forged a connection. This year VNS Westchester became the first home care provider to try out the POM device.

Now, after wrapping up the pilot program with 25 home care workers, VNS Westchester told *Crain's*, it is planning to offer the device to all its field-based staff: more than 200 workers. The organization also is working on rolling out the device as an employee benefit for non-field-based staff and family members.

The device is about the size of a half dollar, making it more discreet than a mobile phone. It can be attached to a lanyard, a nursing or therapy bag, or a key chain. With three taps, it connects the user to a dispatcher, who can view the user's location and profile. The dispatcher can send emergency services to the user if necessary.

"It's a virtual escort for traveling places, from Dutchess County and upstate all the way to the Bronx," Leddy said. "We decided this coming January to offer it to all field-based staff free of charge."

One reason for the interest, Leddy said, is that home care visits are often "not what they used to be." Patients sometimes are discharged sicker, he said, and home care workers might be traveling a half-hour between visits.

According to a 2015 study published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, studies have found that **between 5% and 61%** of home care workers have experienced some form of workplace violence.

Offering the POM device "shows the staff that we take their safety as priority," Leddy said. "We're hoping a majority of staff take advantage of" the benefit.

Leahy said VNS Westchester was "the first health care provider that we spoke to that was very interested in providing these safety devices for home care. It made sense as I came to understand the way [Leddy] runs his organization. He thinks outside the box."

For home care workers, "their workplace is the home of the patient—inside other peoples' residences," Leahy said, unlike in a hospital, where there would be security personnel and a camera at every turn.

From the first meeting with the clinical leadership team at VNS Westchester, "everyone had a story about feeling uneasy either in a home or in an unfamiliar neighborhood," Leahy said.

Customized features for the line of work include mobile check-ins and checkouts for appointments with nurse managers.

Leahy and Leddy declined to provide their arrangement's financial terms, but Leahy said that, in general, customers pay for the device, plus a monthly service fee. The company currently has about a dozen health care customers including VNS Westchester.

"Overall the feedback [from the VNS pilot program] was really positive," Leahy said. "We are thrilled that they're going to move forward with this for everyone next year."

Krzysztof Dragan, a registered nurse at VNS Westchester, told *Crain's*, "I'm fortunate that I haven't had to use the POM yet, but having it on my key chain gives me tremendous peace of mind at all times—during and after work hours.

"Home care can be an unpredictable environment," Dragan said. "You don't know what you'll find when you walk through the door of a patient's home, by yourself, in terms of the behavior of patients, family members or others who may be present.

"The POM is like a Life Alert button for the home care worker," Dragan added. "I know I can push a button and help will be on the way."

The Home Care Association of New York State said it's important to have safety measures in place.

"With emerging technologies, providers have a greater variety of tools at their disposal for staff safety," Celisia Street, director of education at the association, said in a statement provided to *Crain's*. "HCA is eager to share VNS Westchester's program, along with others, at the national level as part of the Blueprint for Excellence initiative led by ElevatingHome and the Visiting Nurse Associations of America." —Jennifer Henderson
