

# NURSE MARIA

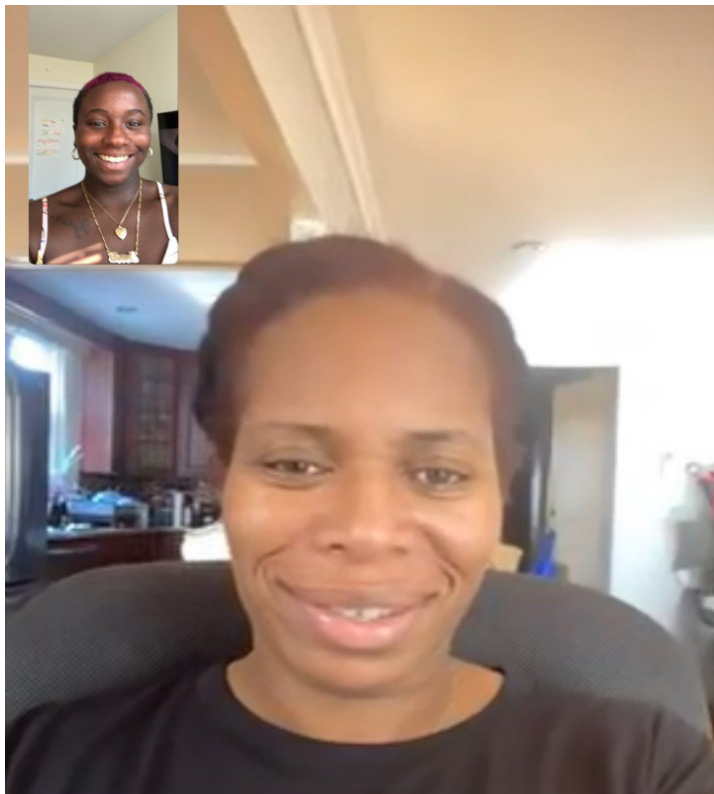
## TENACIOUS SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Say what you will about New Yorkers, they understand COVID-19. Nobody dares try to convince them it's a hoax. Memories from March and April, when the outbreak across the city was raging and refrigerated trucks were parked outside hospitals to serve as overflow morgues, are never far from their thoughts.**

Maria, a Nurse-Family Partnership® (NFP) nurse at Public Health Solutions in Staten Island, said the moms she serves don't have to be persuaded that the coronavirus is a threat. They know that too well.

In the midst of the city's lockdown, one mom told Maria she was worried about her toddler not speaking.

"I tried to be reassuring and told her it was going to be OK," Maria said. "The child is growing up in a bilingual home, so sometimes there is a delay with a child learning two languages at once, and I explained that."



After social distancing restrictions were put in place, Maria (center) shifted from in-home visits to communicating with clients, like Sharelle (top left), by phone or video.

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But just to be sure, Maria referred her to a speech therapist who did a videoconference to evaluate the child.

"She told her it was common in a dual-language home and that everything was going to be fine. It really helped. She relaxed.

"It's a scary world they're living in. That's why we're here."

After social distancing restrictions were put in place nationwide, NFP nurses rapidly shifted from providing in-home visits to communicating with their clients by phone or video conference.

The NFP National Service Office has partnered with Verizon and Action Technologies Group (ATG) to provide iPhones at no cost to moms in need to make sure families can access services regardless of the extraordinary circumstances. When Maria found out that some of her clients didn't have a phone, she was able to provide them with an iPhone to stay connected with them throughout the pandemic.

The nurses already were skilled at using telehealth technology, and these visits have continued to be a lifeline for new moms needing support from their nurses throughout the pandemic. While everyone was struggling to deal with the pandemic, new moms still were facing the challenges inherent in caring for their babies.

"Sure, there were questions about the virus – mostly 'When is this going to end?' – but there still were lots of

the typical questions about what to expect in childbirth, what happens in the hospital and what's going on with their babies," Maria said.

"I was the one asking most of the COVID questions, always asking what's your temperature and if you have a cough or fatigue or gastro-intestinal problems."

Maria has had clients who lost family members to COVID, and others with serious medical conditions who were afraid to go to the doctor.

Some ended up in shelters when family problems flared due to the pressures of living together in close quarters to isolate themselves from the virus. Many struggled to pay bills and buy food because their jobs disappeared in the shutdown.

"One mom lives near a bridge on Staten Island and would hear the sirens from ambulances coming for people jumping off the bridge because there was an increase in suicide attempts," Maria said. "How devastating is that."

As an NFP nurse, Maria is more than a medical professional. She is also part counselor, part social worker and 100 percent dedicated to her families.

"I've always been an advocate for women," she said. "To be born a girl, a lot of times we are handed some not-so-nice things in life. This is a big reason I became a nurse."

"I also feel as a mother of two daughters I want them to understand that there's a sisterhood. I want them and my clients to know no matter what the situation, you can tell me anything."

It works.

"My clients are very open with me. People just talk to me. I don't know if it's just to drop their load on me and leave or what," she said laughing, "but they open up to me."

From the time she was a child, Maria wanted to work in health care.

"At first I wanted to be a doctor and I got a scholarship to study medicine," she said. "I did it a year and didn't like it, so I dropped out, went to nursing school and I never looked back. I do believe that nursing is a calling. I love it."

"And on this job, I'm not only dealing with the moms, I'm dealing with their families and that whole interaction. It's perfect for me."

On her days off, Maria has worked in the intensive care unit at Kings County Hospital, helping treat patients seriously ill with COVID-19.

"I became a nurse because I wanted to heal and to see so many people dying was very hard on me," she said. "As a nurse, I'd only wrapped one body in 18 years. During the outbreak, I was wrapping four or five bodies a night. I was afraid I was developing PTSD."

Throughout it all, Maria worked hard to stay positive and focus on her NFP moms, their babies and her two daughters to make sure they all are healthy and coping throughout the pandemic. Helping them stay safe is satisfying to her.

In addition to providing counseling and medical advice, she has delivered gift cards provided by local philanthropic funders to pay for diapers and food, and all manner of support to get them through the pandemic.

While COVID-19 protocols have required every contact to be handled via phone or telemedicine, Maria said her moms have adapted remarkably well to the virtual meetings. The moms she serves are good about taking precautions. They are not ones to dismiss mask protocols or to violate orders limiting social gatherings.

This new reality has required nurses to develop new skills and strategies for delivering care, and they are continually learning from each other.

"My supervisor has been amazing. The nurses are all very dedicated, and the moms are incredibly resilient. We're all working together."

"We'll get through this," Maria said, "but New Yorkers are changed by the experience."

"We've seen way too much."