

## Nurse Family Partnership Provides a Boost to Low-Income Moms



Yessica Amaya and son Diego meet with Adelmis Grano de Oro, right, a registered nurse with VNS Health. Credit: Corey Sipkin

*Lisa Colangelo, Dec 28, 2023*

When Adelmis Grano de Oro stops by to see Yessica Amaya and her 23-month-old son Diego in their Long Beach apartment, it feels as if an old friend is visiting.

They talk about the new skills Diego has mastered, what he likes to eat, and allowing him to learn the all-important yet difficult task of soothing himself when he is upset or tired.

But Grano de Oro is there for more than casual mom talk. She is a seasoned registered nurse with VNS Health, a home health care provider who is helping guide Amaya, 24, through the vital early childhood years and making sure she also is taking care of herself.

They are in a program called the Nurse Family Partnership, which pairs a nurse with a first-time pregnant mom. The goal is to assist underserved women during their pregnancy and track their child's development and health for their first two years.

### WHAT TO KNOW

- **A national program to help low-income, first-time moms** has served over 600 families in Nassau County since 2014.

- **The Nurse Family Partnership pairs moms with** specially-trained registered nurses who visit regularly during a woman's pregnancy and the first two years of her child's life.
- **The nurse assists the new mom with** her child's health and development as well as caring for herself.

Research has shown benefits to mom and child, including fewer preterm births and more immunizations at 6 months when compared with low-income women who were not in the program. Children enrolled also had fewer injuries and visits to an emergency department for accidents and poisoning, according to the [Nurse Family Partnership](#).

More than 40 states have Nurse Family Partnership programs serving more than 54,000 families every year, paid for by federal, state, local and private funds. In New York, the programs are in eight counties — including Nassau — and the five boroughs of New York City, operated by a variety of health system partners, including VNS Health. About 600 families in Nassau have been in the program since 2014. Martine Hackett, director of public health programs at Hofstra University and a researcher who has specialized in maternal-child health, said she saw results of the Nurse Family Partnership program when she worked at the New York City Health Department.

"By focusing on first-time mothers and pairing them with a registered nurse for over two years, NFP employs social support, health education and coaching to change the lives of new mothers and their children," Hackett said.

Amaya's cousin told her about the Nurse Family Partnership, and Amaya signed up right away. After a stint on a waiting list, Amaya started meeting with Grano de Oro virtually and then in person. "I always wanted to become a mother," said Amaya, who works as a teacher's assistant. "When I found out I was pregnant ... I felt so scared because I didn't know how to take care of a pregnancy and how to take care of a newborn."

She said she was ready with a lot of questions and the desire to get educated about motherhood. But she found she also needed the emotional support that Grano de Oro supplied.

"The way she talked to me with a smile on her face, she understood what I was feeling like," Amaya said. "She was there to remind me a lot of moms feel the same way as me, not just me not feeling ready."

### **An early start**

During the first four weeks of the program, the nurse and mother meet weekly in order to make a strong connection, Grano de Oro said. The visits continue once every two weeks until the baby is born. Advocating for healthy habits as early as possible in the pregnancy is key for the mom and the baby, said Dr. Brian McKenna, an obstetrician who is also managing director of Women's Health for the East End at Peconic Bay Medical Center.

"Minimizing toxins and maximizing good nutrition really pays off for the development of the baby," he said. "As I tell my patients, the first trimester is important because that is when everything forms. The second and third trimester is when everything gets bigger."

After the birth, the nurse visits once a week for six weeks to help the new moms with everything from breastfeeding to diapering and bonding. Then the visits resume every two weeks until the child is 20 months old. The final visits are monthly in an effort to ease the transition out of the program.

“One of the beautiful things of working in a long-term program is that you meet one person and you graduate another,” Grano de Oro said. “Looking back, I can remember seeing her on Zoom for the first time. She was kind of like a deer in the headlights. Now she knows exactly what she is not sure of, and she’s not afraid to ask it anymore.”



Adelmis Grano de Oro, with laptop, saw disparities her sister faced as a teen mom of color in Brooklyn. Credit: Corey Sipkin  
Yessica Amaya signed up for the Nurse Family Partnership shortly after finding out she was pregnant. She wasn’t sure if she would have time for the weekly visits with her busy work schedule. But she and her husband wanted to be better prepared for when the baby arrived.

When she was done with her part-time school job, Amaya worked a full shift at a Panera Bread eatery. She continued until just a short time before she gave birth.

“I was concerned about taking care of my pregnancy,” she said. “What prenatal [vitamins] were better, what foods do I avoid?”

For example, she was surprised to learn that some cheeses — and especially ones that are unpasteurized — are deemed unsafe to eat during pregnancy.

“I’m from Honduras,” Amaya said. “We eat a lot of cheese. We eat it with everything, basically.” After Diego was born, she was able to call or text Grano de Oro with any question or concern, such as noticing a rash.

“She would respond to my text right away,” she said. “She was always there for me.”

## On a mission

Adelmis Grano de Oro witnessed firsthand what happens when young moms don't get the support they need.

"My sister had a baby at a very young age," she said. "I saw the disparities she was faced with being a teen mom of color in Brooklyn."

Once her pregnancy was known, her sister was moved out of her private school into a public school. School officials, concerned about her growing belly, then sent her to an alternative school. The young mom-to-be also was disrespected by her doctors, her sister recalled.

"When I was a little girl, I remember seeing my sister cry after my niece was born and she was feeling like she wasn't good enough of a mom," Grano de Oro, 40, said. "I feel like that marked me in a way that it made me really want to be someone that could create change in young people."

She thought being a labor nurse would allow her to work with new moms and did that for years until she learned about the Nurse Family Partnership.

"It is truly a mission to create change and create what you know every mom innately has in them," she said. "[We] just help them, give them a little push to do it."

She makes sure her patients stay on top of their medical appointments and explains to her pregnant patients who may be concerned about gaining weight that they should focus on eating nutritious meals.

And she teaches them to advocate for themselves, noting many people are scared to complain or call a doctor.

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