



MHCD

Research with a Mission

ALUMNA GIVES A VOICE TO COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH

Earning her doctorate in operations research from the Leeds School of Business has let **Linda LaGanga (Ph.D. '06)** research how to make health care systems work better. She also uses her research work to bring a voice to the issue of

community mental health.

"I don't think the public understands mental health or the need for community mental health services, so one of my goals has been to educate the public, including academic communities," LaGanga says, who is Director of Quality Systems and Operational Excellence at the Mental Health Center of Denver (MHCD).

There she leads and coordinates strategic planning with the Board of Directors and staff, and her department collaborates with clinical staff on treatment and recovery from mental

"People don't realize how prevalent mental illness is," she explains. "Most mental health services are delivered in outpatient and community settings rather than in hospitals; for the most part the people we work with live in the community. We help children, families, and adults to lead healthier, happier, and more productive lives. Everyone knows someone with some level of mental illness."

With degrees in math and computer science, as well as master's degrees in operations research and clinical mental health counseling, LaGanga joined MHCD as a therapist on a community treatment team but worked her way back into roles in administration and quality improvement.

What LaGanga soon realized was that meeting state and federal regulations and compliance were also part of the job; part of her motivation to get a doctorate was to learn new tools and approaches to improve the health care systems to serve the cause she cared about.

As a Ph.D. candidate at the Leeds School, she met with Leeds School professor Steve Lawrence, who was her advisor, to discuss topics for her dissertation. LaGanga told Lawrence that she wanted to work on how to expand capacity in health care settings — again her commitment to making the systems work better not far from her mind. Lawrence suggested they approach it as an appointment scheduling problem.

"From his experience in manufacturing scheduling, he had the perspective to approach it as a business problem and we were able to propose scheduling solutions with that research," she says.

Their research together on the benefits and costs of appointment overbooking received widespread press coverage, being featured in *American Medical News*, *Wall Street Journal Online*, *Denver Business Journal*, *Colorado Public Radio*, and *ReachMD Radio* shows. Clinics even contacted LaGanga on how they could improve

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illness. Some of her research work is focused on expanding capacity to better serve people who are affected by mental illness. Last year the center served over 13,500 individuals through 32 outpatient care locations, and that number increases about 20 percent every year. Services are delivered in the community, at clinics, in schools, on job sites, in consumers' homes, and in vocational and residential programs.

"I've always had an interest in homelessness and what could I do to make society fairer for everybody," she says. "I wondered how people reach that stage and how can we help them out of that. When people reach that point of living on the streets and have no resources, I don't think they can lift themselves out of that by themselves. Those who can help should help. I felt like that became my goal."

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"Because of my research, I present at conferences and I write papers, which has helped me educate people about why mental health is important and its role in overall health care. Having a Ph.D. has given me a seat at the table of the research community to help educate people about service system issues through my writing and research."