



UMB Champions of Excellence

Kyla Liggett-Creel, PhD, LCSW-C



“Angel” in the Community

*On the Front Lines:
UMB Champions of
Excellence*

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Within a 24-hour span in August, three West Baltimore community members reached out to seek help from Kyla Liggett-Creel, PhD, LCSW-C, clinical assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMSSW) and lead strategist for the Baltimore City Health Department's (BCHD)

Office of Youth and Trauma Services.

Two of them had lost jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other had no health insurance.

“Those are real-life situations, all within 24 hours,” said Liggett-Creel, who looked for financial resources to help the three people, consulted with colleagues to provide job search aid and advice, then found time to organize a caravan to congratulate a new father.

This service to the community is emblematic of Liggett-Creel, affectionately known as “Dr. K,” and it compelled Niharika Khanna, MBBS, MD, professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine (DFCM) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, to nominate her as a University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) Champion of Excellence.

Liggett-Creel has been central to the external pandemic response in West Baltimore, says Khanna. When UMSSW received a request from DFCM to develop culturally responsive COVID-19 education materials, Liggett-Creel worked closely with Khanna to develop a series of informational videos.

“Kyla brings exceptional energy and enthusiasm to her work,” Khanna said. “She has maintained warm relationships with the Baltimore community and championed their causes. She is a wonderful collaborator.”

Liggett-Creel also has led an initiative called COVID Conversations, a UMSSW-staffed hotline where community members with concerns about COVID-19 can speak to a school representative who can answer basic questions and be an empathetic ear, as well as the Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma Program with support from BCHD.

She is not one for the spotlight, however, saying her UMB honor says more about the University’s commitment to community engagement than it does about her.

“It’s exciting that UMB is recognizing the importance of collaborating with the community as well as the strength, resilience, and power of community organizations,” she said. “I’m honored to be considered a partner with the community.”

Last spring, UMSSW colleague Paul Sacco, PhD, MSW, told Liggett-Creel that DFCM had requested consultation in developing the culturally responsive materials, and he thought she was perfect for the job. “Kyla embodies that ethic of service central to our mission at the School of Social Work and UMB,” Sacco said.

She contacted three nonprofits — Sons of Phoenix, HeartSmiles, and Youth Bmore Uprise — for input on what type of messaging was needed and which delivery avenues would be most effective. The nonprofits’ leaders say Liggett-Creel has been their champion all along.

“She’s been an angel,” said Kelly Sparks, founder of Sons of Phoenix. “Her contribution to the community is undeniable.”

Added Joni Holifield, founder of HeartSmiles: “Dr. K is everything. Not that many white ladies come rolling up in West Baltimore talking and hugging people, but she can do that because she shows up as her authentic self.”

“She’s been a mentor, a big sister, everything to me,” echoed Tracey Jones, founder of Youth Bmore Uprise. “If it wasn’t for her assistance, I don’t know where we’d be right now.”

- Mary Therese Phelan

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