



EXCELLENCE IN DIVERSITY

TUFTS HEALTH PLAN

WALKING THE WALK: While Tufts Health Plan sees tailoring products to minority communities as a business imperative, it also invests in developing diverse talent in-house. The Operations Up! group mentoring program has had success in creating upward mobility for minority groups in the company. From left, Darrell Thomas, participant and call center supervisor; Jennifer Chin, participant and claims supervisor; Benise Donahue, senior program manager (of Operations Up!), business performance team; Natasha Vega, participant and member services supervisor; and Jason Kao, participant and business analyst.

COURTESY TUFTS HEALTH PLAN

Diversity trend spurs better service, growth

BY MARY HOWE | Contributing Writer

ABOUT 18 MONTHS AGO Tufts Health Plan, which provides health insurance to 1 million customers in New England, was surprised by demographic news that appeared to portend opportunity.

A survey by the company found that Tufts' customer group was only 15 percent ethnic and racial minorities, in contrast to 26 percent for the whole population in Massachusetts, the insurer's home state.

Juan Lopera, Tufts' vice president for business diversity, who quoted these figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, said, "We were surprised at how under-represented our members were with diverse groups. We have ground to make up, and a huge opportunity for business growth."

Further, Lopera said, the Census Bureau says the population of the Bay State is expected to remain flat through 2020, but the proportion of minorities is expected to grow by 10 percent. (Census Bureau projections say non-Hispanic whites will be 44 percent of the U.S. population by 2060.)

"Ethnic minorities are growing in double digits," Lopera said. "This is an opportunity to tailor our products to them." Lopera called Tufts' movement into minority communities a business imperative.

Tufts defines diversity as racial and ethnic minorities, veterans, elderly people, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Outreach to these groups of people quickly became a major element in the company's Vision 2020 corporate strategy.

"We put in place an ambitious goal: to double the diversity of our membership by 2020," Lopera said.

Lopera, a Spanish-speaking Latino who had been with the company for several years, was named to the new role of VP of business diversity in 2015.

Early in its diversity campaign, Tufts chose five communities in Massachusetts with populations that were 50 percent or more minority groups. Tufts created marketing materials in Spanish and made sure that primary-care doctors favored by Hispanics were brought into the Tufts network. In a year, the number of Medicare-eligible people in those towns served by Tufts doubled.

Many initiatives are companywide. Earlier, Tufts had used bilingual people on staff to take customer calls if a translator was needed. With Vision 2020 backing, Tufts created a language academy to teach people how to handle technical health care terminology in several languages.

Tufts has partnered with community organizations already working with minorities, such as Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston.

Diabetes falls heavily on blacks and Latinos, partly because of diet. Lopera described an effort to retrain Latino cooks in preparing beans more healthfully – with less sodium and using brown rice – in a demonstration that mimicked a popular Spanish soap opera production. Similarly, Tufts worked with Fenway Health to teach employees how to talk with LGBT customers about sensitive topics like gender reassignment surgery.

Tufts' efforts to invest in traditional minority groups embraces customers and also its own employees. Lopera said the Tufts Health Plan staff is 69 percent women and 32 percent people "from diverse communities." The company runs the Operations Up! initiative, which develops young minority-group employees with management potential with a combination of teaching and mentoring to help them move up in the organization.

Many senior staff members of Tufts serve on boards of organizations in minority communities. Lopera, for instance, is a member of the Association of Latino Professionals of America. Employee groups within the company, such as the YMCA Achievers, composed largely of black professionals, volunteer with groups that include the Dimock Community Health Center in Roxbury, Mass., which historically has had a large black population. ■

'Ethnic minorities are growing in double digits. This is an opportunity.'

JUAN LOPERA,
Tufts Health Plan vice president
for business diversity