



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Bhargava New Director of Programs Serving Women and Families Affected by Incarceration**

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) recently named Ranjana Bhargava as the new director of Connections, part of the agency's Prisoner and Family Ministry. The program, headquartered at 2907 S. Wabash in Chicago, provides social services to women in Illinois prisons, previously incarcerated women who are re-entering the Chicago community, and the children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers. The programs include: Visits to Mom/Visits to Dad, RAPP (Relatives As Parents Program) and re-entry services for women leaving prison.

A resident of South Shore, Bhargava is a pioneer in addressing domestic violence on a national level. Bhargava says that services to incarcerated women, whom she terms "the most underserved population in Illinois," need "the same care and follow-up as do children who have a disability. If focused referral and resource-building is not available to these women, all we are doing is sending them back to prison."

She describes the Connections programs as being about "change, the availability of resources and the acceptance of the women back into society. Organizations and institutions need to partner to bring families together with dignity, justice and hope," she says.

What drives her, she adds, is "to make social causes into action. I've taken this position because I believe I can take these programs to the next level by bringing them more recognition and thereby increasing funding for them."

Bhargava, a graduate of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, has a 40-year career in social services, specifically focused on mental health services for Asian people and those who are oppressed. She worked for the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Public Library, the latter as the EEOC officer. In that position, she says she helped to bring about a reduction in staff complaints in the library system through organizing a "cluster partnership" of the various libraries.

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She also worked in the office of Congressman Bobby Rush and was the executive director of Asian Human Services in Chicago. Bhargava is the founder of Apna Ghar, Inc., the first U.S. shelter for battered Asian women. She served as the shelter's president for two years and executive director for six years. Bhargava also was one of eight women from Chicago who attended the UN-sponsored World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, China.

Bhargava has received many local awards, including the 1994 U.S. Criminal Justice Authority award for exceptional crime fighting, the 1995 WGN-TV community award and the 1998 Ford Foundation award for NGO (non-governmental organization) exceptional work.

"We are blessed to have Ranjana as the new director of Connections," says Jane Otte, executive director of LSSI's Prisoner and Family Ministry. "Ranjana brings with her a deep commitment to the empowerment of women and to the disenfranchised. She is a recognized leader in the Chicago community who knows how to advocate, collaborate and build award-winning programs. Ranjana will help us create a brighter future for women leaving prison and returning to Chicago and their families."

LSSI's Prisoner and Family Ministry programs work to support the families of incarcerated individuals; strengthen relationships between children; incarcerated parents and caregivers; and involve the community in restoring people who are affected by crime.

Founded in 1867, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois is a statewide, not-for-profit social service agency of the three Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). LSSI serves people through an array of services at more than 180 programs at approximately 89 sites across Illinois.

*For more information on Connections and its services, contact Ranjana Bhargava at 312/567-9224, ext.13; or visit [www.LSSI.org](http://www.LSSI.org).*

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