

A Diary by 2006-2007 Institute Fellow Inez Gonzalez
Retreat Two

Institute Fellow Inez Gonzalez is the Director of Media Policy at the National Hispanic Media Coalition. Inez's team is working on a project to urge the State (either by legislation or administrative regulation) to substantially increase the number of women participating in CalWORKs' non-traditional job training programs. These specialized but under-utilized programs teach the skills needed for higher-paying jobs and help establish economic self-sufficiency for low-income women and their families.

Sunday, December 3, 2006

All weekend, I've been thinking about the upcoming WPI retreat and wondering if I'll be able to finish everything for work I need to do before leaving for Sacramento on Tuesday night.

I'm excited about the project my team is working on. Currently, women in CalWORKs job programs that provide skills training for non-traditional, higher-wage jobs (eg., construction trade, biotech industry) constitute very small numbers. Why is this? We want to see a significant increase in the number of women in CalWORKs who are receiving this free, specialized training. We believe that if women can attain the skills needed for higher paying jobs, they can become economically self-sufficient and break the cycle of poverty.

Our team has scheduled three key meetings during the Retreat: one with the Chairperson for the Employment Training Panel (ETP), one with a consultant for the Assembly Budget Committee and the third with the Legislative Staffer with State Senator Ducheny's (D-San Diego) office that handles Workforce and Labor issues. Our goal with these meetings is to introduce ourselves, let them know about our project's objective, gather information and get their recommendations on what our approach should be.

Tuesday, December 5, 2006

It's been a hectic day. I had a lot to get done at my job today before leaving for the WPI retreat. I almost missed my 8:25 p.m. flight! On the plane I was able to do some more of the WPI reading about non-profit organizations involved in lobbying. I realize that many of the recommendations described here can be implemented at my work. More and more, I am connecting the dots between what I am learning and doing in WPI and ways I can increase my organization's advocacy.

At the Sacramento airport, I run into two WPI colleagues from Los Angeles and we share a cab to the Radisson Hotel. Ah, sleep....

Wednesday, December 6, 2006

It is so nice to see all of the WPI women again! Although most of us have only recently met, it's remarkable the bond we've already established. It could be that although we are very different we have a common denominator: We are all community advocates wanting to make our community a better place. Whatever the reason, we are happy to see each other and it shows.

We meet at the Capitol in Room 113. It's an old Senate Committee room in the historic part of the Capital--old dark wood furniture, vaulted ceilings and lace curtains. On the walls around us are framed photos of California's Senate Pro Tempore since 1880 (who have all been White men). And here we all are, women of different colors and backgrounds together, learning how to change public policy. Nice irony.

To start off the day, we go on a tour of the Capitol Building. Even though I've been in this building many times, I learn some great tips on the tour. For example, there is the Legislative Bill Room in the basement where you can order copies of bills and pick them up before visits with elected officials and legislative staffers. The price for this service is very reasonable, and again I think of how helpful this will also be for my job.

The highlights for today are our guest speakers, Nicole Vasquez and Tam Ma. Nicole and Tam give a thorough presentation about the legislative process, covering "A to Z" of how a bill becomes law. Nicole, a Latina, works in the Senate Health Committee. Tam is Asian-American and works for Senator Kuehl. As a minority woman, I can't help but feel pride when listening to their presentation, and I'm thankful of WPI's sensitivity in providing us such diversity in speakers.

One of the key things I learned about was the Legislative Counsel and how that office can work with teams on writing bills. Although I'm not sure that our team will introduce a bill (our project seems to fall more into the regulatory and administrative category), I'm relieved to learn that we don't need to have a lawyer in our team. Staff in the Legislative Counsel's office can work with teams in developing the bill language. What all of us need to do is be absolutely clear about our objective and the concrete results we want to see from our bill or regulation.

Thursday, December 7, 2006

After our Regulatory and Administrative Advocacy session in the morning, our team prepped for our meetings with the Employment Training Panel (ETP) Chairperson and the Assembly Budget Committee Consultant. Our third meeting with the Legislative Staffer with Senator Ducheny's office was postponed until next week, when we will talk via conference call.

Yesterday our team prepared for the meetings by doing some mock meetings. We went over details such as how the agenda will unfold and who speaks when. We are not sure how the ETP Chair will react to our project idea or the questions he'll ask but we feel thoroughly prepared.

The meeting with ETP Chairperson Barry Broad goes very well! We discuss the Welfare to Work (W2W) Pilot Program that ETP has started this year with \$2 million allocated for the program. Barry wasn't aware that women are not participating in a very large numbers in some of the ETP programs and wonders if some type of incentive would encourage contractors to focus on recruiting women for these training programs. This is very encouraging! Also, Barry says he will coordinate a meeting with Ada Carrillo, the Acting Executive Director at ETP, and gives us her contact information. One down, one to go.

The following meeting with Cassey Griffith, Assembly Budget Committee Consultant, also goes very well. Cassey had the impression that we were potential contractors that actually wanted to do the ETP skills training. We explain that we are advocates wanting to make a change in the system that would enable more women participating in CalWORKs to obtain higher skills needed for non-traditional, higher wage jobs.

Cassey agrees to work with us as well and invites us set up another meeting with him in February, when the Budget Committee is in full swing. He does warn us, though, that next year will be a very difficult budget year: CalWORKs may see substantial cuts in its budget, which would impact its training programs. He suggests there might be a benefit in having ETP implement our project as part of their agenda (their budget seems safe). This would give ETP a good model to share with state legislators on how their job training program can take CalWORKs recipients off state programs and help them become economically self-sufficient.

Friday, December 8, 2006

Our team misses part of today's WPI curriculum because we are able to arrange a last-minute meeting with Ada Carrillo, the ETP Acting Director. It's a good sign that Ada returned our call so quickly and re-arranged her schedule to meet with us while we are still in Sacramento.

The meeting lasts for an hour and is very informative. Ada invites us to present our project to the ETP Board of Directors in February. She asks why we are focusing only on the ETP, though, which receives a modest percentage of dollars for CalWORKs training, instead of focusing on the entire CalWORKs training program itself. This is a valid question and after our meeting our team ponders it. After some discussion, we agree we want to focus only on the ETP because that is a smaller agency where it will be easier to implement changes. Once ETP has a model that is successful, we can implement changes at the Department of Social Services under the CalWORKs program.

Our next step is to prepare for the conference call with Senator Ducheny's staffer. In that meeting, we'll want to discuss our project's objective, everything we've learned so far, possible strategies and find out whether the Senator would consider sponsoring our project.