



**LSC/NLADA**  
**National Client Conversations**  
**On Gender and Diversity**

Miami, Florida

November 9, 2001

**Legal Services Corporation**

## **LSC/NLADA National Client Conversations on Diversity In the Legal Services Community**

**Held in conjunction with the NLADA Annual Meeting  
Miami, Florida  
November 9, 2001**

Approximately thirty clients and client board members from civil legal services programs held a four-hour discussion on a broad range of diversity issues. Participants identified and prioritized the diversity concerns experienced by legal services clients.

After reviewing the benefits and challenges facing a program that focuses time, energy, attention, and resources on diversity, participants considered some of the strengths and concerns they and their organizations had experienced in this effort. They identified significant benefits and challenges.

**Benefits for Individuals:** The opportunity to know different cultures and situations deepens our understanding of the nature of poverty and helps us realize that we all have a voice. Appreciation for diversity can help each person to receive their fair share, and let us to feel more clearly the pulse of the community.

**Benefits for Organizations:** Highly diverse staff tends to respond more holistically to client problems. This gives a better understanding of how the client (and community) experiences them.

**Challenges for Individuals:** Being open and educated to accept differences is hard. We all have internal prejudices and external prejudices. Meeting diverse community needs may require additional outreach into the community, particularly at times when client groups are available for meetings. Increasing sensitivity to diversity issues may mean reassessing language and other communication tools. This may be particularly true for board members. For everyone, change involves risk and self-evaluation. Both can be difficult.

Client board members experience special challenges. Their small number on the program's board compared with the greater number of professionals (lawyers) often results in feelings of powerlessness. While the distinction may be based on class rather than race or ethnicity, client board members often do not feel that they are truly part of a coherent entity. They are outnumbered and, at times, perceive their non-client colleagues as "unfriendly."

**Challenges for Organizations:** Organizations must establish mechanisms that tell clients how well the program and staff tolerate differences. Staff training must be grounded in the need to respect differences. Staff will need guidance on addressing ethnicity and racial problems honestly and productively. Legal staff must understand that the various cultures and communities they serve are equally deserving of respect. All

staff must be able to communicate effectively with clients. If this requires bilingual staff, organizations must hire staff that speak two or more languages or invest in language school courses for staff.

**Identification of Internal and External Diversity-Related Issues:** After identifying the benefits and challenges of focusing on inclusion, participants then identified what they saw as the most critical internal and external concerns.

**Internal Diversity-Related Issues:** These situations are affected by or affect diversity populations served by legal services programs.

- Communication between clients and lawyers;
- Reluctance to institute office and meeting hours that accommodate a variety of clients;
- Office culture;
- Adverse impact on certain populations of clients of LSC restrictions;
- Economic differences between clients and program staff;
- Program eligibility requirements that bar many poor clients;
- Access to staff, including telephone and other communication conduits that require majority language skills;
- Parochialism of leaders coupled with a lack vision;
- Paucity of diverse leaders;
- Insufficiently diverse program staff;
- Time and resources;
- To little diversity training for all board members;
- Failure to target diverse communities when recruiting for staff and board;
- Inability to provide holistic services to clients;
- For client board members, their small number on a program board can hinder their ability to speak independently; instead, they tend to support staff positions rather than challenge staff and non-client board members.

**External Diversity-Related Issues:** Some barriers that exist outside of the institutional setting to creating a highly diverse program are:

- Non-LSC funding restrictions that block delivery of service to certain populations;
- Lack of public transportation;
- Laws that affect clients such as welfare-to-work legislation;
- No effective collaboration between LSC and non LSC programs;
- Neighborhood segregation (social, ethnic, racial);
- Lack of opportunities for immigrants to learn English
- Paucity of community organizations that provide non-legal services to clients;
- Money and restrictions, including LSC restrictions;
- Failure of community-at-large and wealthy community to support legal services programs that serve low-income clients.

Participants then selected the most urgent areas for them.

**Top Internal Diversity-Related Issues:**

1. Staff diversity;
2. Recruiting and training of board and staff (mandatory training for all staff, especially multicultural training for attorneys); and
3. Accessibility (physical accessibility and transportation; language accessibility; systems access, i.e., voicemail; decentralized by subject area).

**Top External Diversity-Related Issues:**

1. Welfare to work laws (and other economic increases) decrease clients' ability to serve on boards – this depletes client representation;
2. Communication
3. Lack of collaboration between legal services programs and community advocacy groups coupled with a reluctance to learn about one another; and

4. Lack of unrestricted funds that would allow services for groups now denied legal assistance.

The meeting was then opened up to legal services program staff. The objectives of this portion, attended by approximately 30 clients and 10 staff, were to establish a supportive environment in which to identify skills needed to enhance communication and build more effective relationships; describe the characteristics of effective communication between legal services clients and staff; and seek ways to strengthen communication relationships between the two groups.

**Communication and Feedback:** Participants were separated into small clusters of clients or staff to reflect on what promotes or interferes with effective communication between clients and staff.

#### **What Enhances Effective Communication:**

- Participation by clients in meetings and other aspects of the program's work;
- Clients who show up and speak up;
- A feeling that I (as staff) have the power to help the client;
- Speaking in the client's native tongue and understanding the cultural differences that affect the client/lawyer relationship and/or the problem facing the client;
- Staff and clients who make sure they get what the other is saying;
- Receiving minutes and agenda prior to a board meeting;
- Clients and staff going to meetings together, as partners;
- Staff who clearly care about and help clients;
- Staff who help clients understand what the program does or can do for them;
- Training sessions on communication for board and staff;
- Attorneys who brief clients on cases;
- Staff who show their appreciation for reports from clients;
- Honesty; humor; respect; warmth on everyone's part;
- Allowing the client to participate in case;

- Showing that you're comfortable with the client's or staff's race, gender, ethnicity; sexual orientation, age and other aspects that could divide you both;
- Prior knowledge or experience with problems like that besetting the client;
- Active listening;
- Open lines of communication between staff and client;
- Including client board members in planning and agenda setting.

### **What Hinders Effective Communication:**

- Clients whose feelings of inferiority impede real interaction;
- Clients who aren't open about their feelings;
- Receptionists who give preferential treatment to attorneys;
- Clients who don't participate (voluntarily and involuntarily) in the program, case or staff's efforts;
- Client who stick together at meetings and do not mingle with staff, i.e., stay in their "comfort zone;"
- Misperception that LSC staff are all government bureaucrats;
- Sensing that staff think client problem is not worth their time;
- Not enough time or staff to effectively help;
- Broken promises by staff about follow-up;
- Staff who have preconceived notions about the client or problem;
- Staff do not take the time to get to know client board members;
- Board members who show that they are uninterested in hearing from client board members;
- When staff do not understand or respect our client board members' skills;
- Clients who take staff for granted;

- When unpopular clients or client issues are consistently referred to other organizations or ignored;
- When clients are unrealistic and expect miracles;
- Clients who direct their anger at attorneys;
- Clients or staff who don't listen;
- Staff who use terms, acronyms and other language that is unfamiliar;
- Clients or staff who are not candid, who are reluctant to share, who display fear;
- When there is limited access to staff, or the staff are arrogant or aloof;
- When there is no sensitivity to client diversity;
- When there is not enough client representation on boards.