



**LSC/NLADA
First Regional Conversation
On Diversity**

Region III Project Directors Meeting
Clayton, Missouri

September 29, 2001

Legal Services Corporation

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Background

Approximately sixteen program directors and five representatives of NLADA and LSC came together on the second day of the Region III Project Directors Meeting to discuss diversity challenges faced by legal services programs in that geographic area. The discussion lasted a little over two hours. Montrose Cones and Deborah Howard of Karp Consulting Group led it. This was the third diversity discussion facilitated by the Karp Group. Three objectives guided the September 29 meeting; they were:

- To identify and prioritize the diversity related issues facing participants in their legal services communities;
- To increase participants' awareness of diversity issues; and
- To enhance leadership skills necessary for being effective in a diverse legal services environment.

Benefits of Diversity

Participants considered the broad ramifications of diversity, including race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, age and disability, along with other aspects of an inclusive community. They discussed the benefits to themselves of focusing time and effort on increasing diversity in their programs. The positive results included personal growth, improvement of communication, enjoyment of other cultures and outlooks, broader experiences, enrichment of work environment and learning opportunities, and more fun.

They explored what benefits diversity would bring to their organizations. These were a more accurate reflection of their client communities along with more insight into and support of their various constituencies, and exposure to and (consequent) deeper understanding of different cultures. Programs would experience an improvement in the quality of the work, higher morale among staff, increased opportunity for resource development a more stable workforce and enriched decision-making with better outcomes.

Barriers to Obtaining Greater Diversity

1. *The executive director's perspective*

In spite of the obvious benefits, difficulties bar the way to achieving a diverse workforce, and real determination is needed to overcome them. One of the biggest impediments for each participant is that change is difficult and takes time. Educating staff to the benefits of diversity and defining the boundaries of the change sought or anticipated also require thought, patience, time and a realistic assessment of the frustration involved. Making big changes requires confronting anxieties and fears, opening up personal perspectives and abandoning stereotypes. All of these necessitate hard work and a willingness to take on risks.

Participants noted that bringing new and very different staff into a program could threaten existing staff members and the office culture. People will worry that if someone diverse is hired, they may be fired. Executive directors also need to help their boards understand the importance of these issues and move forward in ways that address diversity needs thoughtfully and appropriately. Directors' relationships with board members on this subject can sometimes require more attention than their efforts with staff.

2. *Difficulties facing an organization*

Organizations experience great challenges in moving toward a more diverse workforce, also. Developing an organizational culture that supports diversity is a threshold step, and that requires an investment of time, money, and other resources. A decision must be made about where and what diversity is needed and then an effort made to overcome the organization's prejudices about the identified group(s). All require management engagement. Recruiting takes time and other resources; retaining new staff is also difficult and may require shifts in the organizational culture.

If diverse leaders are sought, there is the added responsibility of finding the right individual(s) and helping them move up the ladder. Another issue that programs have to grapple with is the additional changes a program might face when a diversity strategy is implemented. For example, a blind attorney could require additional technology so that she can operate as independently as possible, as well as a reader to assist in reviewing documents.

Diversity Related Issues in the Region III Legal Services Community

1. *Internal issues*

The group identified internal issues, that is, those that affected program staff, board, and management. For Region III, they are gender, age, religion, intolerance for

different values and lifestyles, recruiting, retaining, promoting and firing staff, conflict resolution, diversity training, diversity in leadership, fluency in other languages, achieving diversity in small offices, and unions and diversity.

2. *External issues*

The external diversity issues are the challenges of learning and meeting the needs of different cultures and communities in a service area, the limited number of potential staff from diverse communities, challenges of hiring and retaining diverse and talented staff with legal services salaries, law school debt, changing the status quo that has been in place for many years, acceptance of diversity in staff by clients and funders, and the changing demographics in the Region III locales, among others. And although population profiles are changing, there remain areas in Region III where it could be difficult (isolating, risky) for non-whites to live, particularly rural environments where the population is overwhelmingly white and Christian. For one who does not “blend” (at least at first glance), it is hard to work and live in such an area, and challenging to recruiters to find diverse staff willing to do so.

3. *Most urgent issues*

The group prioritized the issues, selecting the top three from each list. Several issues received the same number of votes so that the top three stretched to the top four, five, or six.

The top internal issues are recruitment, language issues, intolerance of different values and lifestyles AND diversity in leadership AND aging organization.

The top external issues are hiring and compensation, law school debt, limited diversity in the area AND being known by clients of diverse communities.

Leadership Concerns

The group then turned to leadership and looked at leadership, power, and privilege. Region III participants examined privileges based on race and ethnicity, profession (lawyer), gender, age and geography. This discussion focused on asking questions to help executive directors examine who leaders are and how they are formed. It did not result in any conclusions.