

PolicyLink Regional Equity '08 Conference Report

Presented by: Carolynn Mambu, Melissa Bondi, Dennis Chestnut, Don Edwards, and Sharon Cowey

I. Conference Background

PolicyLink held its Regional Equity '08 Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, on March 5-7, 2008. Over 1,800 regional equity supporters gathered together to network and discuss the best practices of diverse equity fields, such as affordable housing, infrastructure, education, health, and much more. The Washington Regional Equity Network sent 5 members to the conference; approximately 800 delegation members were present from across the globe. The Prince Charitable Trusts and PolicyLink generously provided five scholarships for WREN representatives to attend the conference. WREN's delegation included Carolynn Mambu, Melissa Bondi, Dennis Chestnut, and Secretariat Staff Don Edwards and Sharon Cowey. This report provides brief experience overviews by each of the WREN attendees, as well as the group's recommended next steps for WREN.

II. Individual Experiences

A. Carolynn Mambu

Carolynn Mambu is the Director of Public Policy for the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers.

"I would like to thank the Washington Regional Equity Network, the Prince Charitable Trusts, and PolicyLink for the opportunity to attend the Regional Equity '08 Conference in New Orleans, LA. As a representative of a regional association of grantmakers, I was particularly interested to learn about the innovative ways foundations are bringing organizations and the public sector together to solve some of these complex community issues. I look forward to using what I learned to help shape programs and thinking in our local community."

B. Melissa Bondi

As Housing Director for the Coalition for Smarter Growth, Melissa Bondi leads equitable development policy and planning initiatives across the Washington Metropolitan area. She also serves on numerous local, regional

1920 L Street NW, Suite 500 ☞ Washington, DC 20036

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and statewide planning, transportation, community development and housing boards and committees.

"I met and talked policy with many leaders and fellow advocates on issues relating to affordable housing, environmental protection, land use and transportation from all across the country. I enjoyed the excellent plenary discussions on a wide range of social justice and revitalization issues. It was rewarding to serve as part of a delegation, representing the work of WREN and serving as a resource to others on efforts in and around the Washington, DC Metro region. Another benefit was the chance to spend time with my fellow delegates, sharing experiences and brainstorming on ideas to bring back to strengthen WREN."

C. Dennis Chestnut

Dennis Chestnut is the Chairman of the Watts Branch Community Alliance, Program/Volunteer Coordinator for Washington Parks & People, President of the Hillbrook Community Association, Chairman of the Development Committee and member of the Advisory Committee for the Lincoln Heights/Richardson Dwellings New Communities Program, and co-chair of the Parks and Recreation Committee Transition Team for Mayor Adrian Fenty. He leads the community engagement effort for the multi-million dollar restoration of Marvin Gaye Park (formerly Watts Branch Park) and the largest park restoration project of its kind ever in Washington, D.C. He is also involved in many community improvement efforts including Green workforce development, environmental justice, and youth programming.

"I enjoyed the interaction with the team members of the delegation that WREN assembled to represent Washington, D.C. on March 5-7. I learned from and was motivated by the many discussions that I listened to in the workshops on building a movement for healthy communities, using geographic data for neighborhood revitalization, and sharing prosperity. I especially enjoyed the plenary and caucuses that were very motivating. I would like to thank WREN and the members of our delegation for the opportunity to gain such a diverse perspective and experience. Educating the community and expanding regional cooperation was a common theme throughout the conference."

D. Sharon Cowey

Sharon Cowey is a mediator for Justice and Sustainability Associates and WREN's webmaster.

“At the PolicyLink Regional Equity Conference, I attended sessions that better enabled me to further WREN’s mission. For example, as WREN’s webmaster, I attended the E-Advocacy workshop where the group discussed effective strategies and cost-efficient tactics for reaching out to the community through internet tools. I also participated in a Researchers Workshop to discuss options for utilizing undergraduate and graduate school students in the progression of regional equity. University professors and researchers weighed in on their observations and suggestions for valuable methods that would benefit both the students and the organizations offering the internships.”

E. Don Edwards

Don Edwards is CEO and lead mediator for Justice and Sustainability Associates and WREN’s coordinator. Don serves on the Board of Directors of the Casey Trees Endowment, the Board of Directors of the Humanities Council of the District of Columbia and the Board of Directors of the George Washington Chapter of Lambda Alpha International. Furthermore, Don is a faculty member of the DC Neighborhood College, a program of the George Washington University’s Center for Excellence in Public Leadership.

“The Regional Equity ‘08 Conference was quite inspiring and revitalizing for me. PolicyLink could not have planned the Conference for a better ‘moment’ in time; our society is in the midst of national elections and culture change. A theme of watchful anticipation seemed to echo throughout the conference plenary meetings and sessions. I have returned to Washington, DC, re-energized with hope for the future of regional equity across the nation, especially the Washington Metropolitan Region. I was encouraged to see the WREN delegation members take advantage of many opportunities to learn and network among their colleagues. In the future, I anticipate WREN utilizing these colleagues and playing a large role in Congressional lobbying efforts for issues such as the end of poverty, affordable housing, healthcare for all, new infrastructure, and much more. I look forward to continuing the growth and development of the Washington Regional Equity Network.”

III. Suggested Next Steps for WREN

The delegation met at the close of the conference to discuss appropriate next steps for WREN. Detailed below are its recommendations.

A. Conference Debrief

The PolicyLink plenary presentations and discussions were rich with information, ideas, proven strategies, and motivating dialogue. WREN should provide its members opportunities to discuss selected digital conference proceedings. Such discussions will bring added value to WREN's mission pursuit.

B. WREN as local Host for PolicyLink Legislative Visits

When PolicyLink lobbying delegations arrive in Washington, DC, WREN should serve as their host. Our network is a great local resource for congressional education activities. Participation by WREN's regional members will strengthen the overall lobbying efforts in Congress, thereby increasing the success rate of the effort.

C. Map Making

A visually rich "Regional Equity Map " will significantly help equity activists advance their agenda. WREN should research options for creating a regional equity map. This map could be used for identification of needs as well as a persuasive tool when speaking with elected officials and decision-makers.

D. WREN Internship/Mentorship Programs

WREN should grow its capacity to engage undergraduate interns. When taking on interns, WREN could match them with mentors in their field of interest. For example, WREN could connect an intern interested in affordable housing with an organization that specializes in that field. In this way, WREN will help train a new generation of social activists.

E. Support Local Launch of "Trouble the Water"

Danny Glover's soon-to-be released feature film, "Trouble the Water," is a striking portrayal of the after effects and lack of response to victims of Hurricane Katrina. The movie starkly communicates the reality of regional inequity and its effect on the nation. The organization of a film series that includes "Trouble the Water," will help people understand the interconnections of regional equity in the Washington metropolitan region.

F. Engage Neighborhood Leaders

WREN should engage more local neighborhood leaders like Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, civic association representatives and faith leaders. A larger core group of neighborhood leaders and activists united across the Washington region into an informed and focused network will advance regional policy changes and implementation.

G. Convene and Host “Black and Brown Conversations”

Plenary panelists brought to light the rising issue of race within our society. Racial tensions are growing between America’s black and brown communities. Each community is facing similar issues, but currently most of them do not talk to or work with each other enough. WREN should convene and host conversations across the region about the challenges and opportunities that face the black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and other “communities of color.”

H. Explore Regional Funding for Public Education

The District of Columbia is in the midst of a change period involving the public school system. This dynamic is being duplicated throughout metropolitan Washington. WREN could contribute value at this moment by hosting discussions about a regional educational snapshot of the entire region. Two suggested questions for the conversation could be:

1. What are the current and/or ideal formulas for producing public education funding in the region?
2. What is an adequate level of funding for education?

I. Community Benefits Agreements’ Contribution to Regional Equity

The metropolitan region continues to experience growth and continued prosperity is forecast. However, the benefits of regional prosperity are not being distributed equitably. The moment is right to help communities understand how “community benefits agreements” can increase the achievement of shared and balanced prosperity as a result of economic development. Before development begins, residents should be prepared to negotiate the best deals for their neighborhoods. WREN could help educate community members on the benefits of CBAs and teach them how to extract the most value from continued regional development.