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Roundtable Highlights Unique Needs of Domestic Workers

HARTFORD -- The first of a series of policy roundtables co-sponsored by the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau and the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) was held recently at the Legislative Office Building, Hartford. The gathering brought together experts in the field of the domestic workers – laborers defined as someone who works within the employer's household, such as elder and childcare workers, housekeepers and personal aides.

About two dozen statewide policy experts and stakeholders joined in the roundtable, as well as a few speakers from Boston. The three organizing groups convened the roundtable on Sept. 25 to elicit ideas for what public policy initiatives might need to be taken to support this workforce, which often suffers from low wages, job insecurity, isolation and lack of benefits.

Jacqueline Cooke, regional director of the Women's Bureau, and Natalicia Tracy, director of the Massachusetts-based Brazilian Immigrant Center, lauded the PCSW for its work advancing the interests of domestic workers; PCSW worked on legislative initiatives to protect this workforce as early as 1979.

"It was important to convene these strategic thinkers because of the complexities of the issues confronting the domestic workforce," said Teresa Younger, executive director of the PCSW. "Many of these workers do not even know what their rights are, and so codifying what's available to them is crucial to bettering their situations."

Alice Pritchard, executive director of CWEALF, said it's important that advocates for domestic laborers work as "a collective and not segregate into smaller concerns by the workers' roles." Pritchard said that regardless of whether the worker is caring for a child or an elderly person, the potential for exploitation is always there.

Natalicia Tracy came to America from Brazil when she was 17 years old to work as a nanny. She soon found herself working 90-hour weeks and earning just \$25 per week. Sensing her own exploitation, she vowed to advocate for women in similar situations and eventually founded the Brazilian Immigrant Center.

Jacqueline Cooke said the Women's Bureau's was founded in 1920 – three months before women gained the right to vote – to “promote the interests of wage-earning women.”

“Domestic workers too frequently suffer from long hours, low pay and not necessarily safe working conditions,” said Cooke.

Participants who shared their perspectives and concerns included:

Sandra Barrachina, Department of Labor, Wage and Workplace Standards Division;
Lindsay Farrell, Connecticut Working Families; Jillian Gilcrest, Connecticut Association of Human Services; Lisa Levy, Greater Hartford Legal Aid; Susan Nofi-Bendici, New Haven Legal Assistance; Leonela Cruz, International Institute of Connecticut; Jessica Sager, All Our Kin; Monique Turner-Lopez, YWCA Hartford Region;
Sam Gilchrist, New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199; Helen Figuerora, CSEA-SEIU Local 2001, The Child Care Union; Werner Oyanadel, Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission; Deb Migneault, Commission on Aging; Elaine Zimmerman, Commission on Children; Lesley Mills, Griswold Special Home Care;
Michael Felsen, U.S. Department of Labor; Neil Patrick, U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division; Meghan Vasel, Brazilian Immigrant Center of Connecticut; and Paul Mangiafico, DOL, OSHA.

Click **HERE** for additional resources, including notes, reports and U.S. Dept. of Labor Fact Sheets.

Shown in accompanying photos:

Roundtable participants (left to right): Natalicia Tracy, Brazilian Immigrant Center, Boston; Meghan Vasel, Brazilian Immigrant Center of Connecticut; Susan Nofi-Bendici, New Haven Legal Assistance; Sam Gilchrist, New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199; Deb Migneault, Commission on Aging; and Sandra Barrachina, Department of Labor, Wage and Workplace Standards Division.

Headshots (left to right): Jacqueline Cooke, U.S. Dept. of Labor's Women's Bureau; Lesley Mills, Griswold Special Home Care; and Teresa Younger, PCSW.

About the PCSW: The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women was formed in 1973 under Sec. 46a-1 of the Connecticut General Statutes to study and improve Connecticut women's economic security, health and safety; to promote consideration of qualified women to leadership positions and to work toward the elimination of gender discrimination. As a non-partisan arm of the General Assembly, the agency monitors, critiques and recommends changes to legislation in order to inform public policy, and assesses programs and practices in all State agencies for their effect on the state's women. The PCSW serves as a liaison between government and its diverse constituents, and convenes stakeholders, including the business, non-profit and educational communities, local governments, and the media, in order to promote awareness of women's issues.