

A positive progress report for HREEO and Director Frias

Written by Ryan T. Scott
Friday, 23 April 2010 12:56



St. Paul College soon will celebrate its 100 year anniversary, a fitting environment for the first annual Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Department (HREEO) Progress Report to the community and department commissioners.

On February 12, 2009, Luz Maria Frias stepped into the Directors position of the newly merged Human Rights and Equal Opportunity (HREEO) Department. On April 20, 2010 Frias delivered the Progress Report to the broad overall satisfaction of attendees to the public meeting. “I am extremely proud of the work that our employees have accomplished this past year. You’ll see that our approach has been to think creatively about addressing institutional barriers. As a result, there have been numerous staff-driven measures that have led to systemic change, ultimately benefiting our constituents in unprecedented ways,” said Frias.

First Ward Councilmember Melvin Carter III, said “change wouldn’t be possible without the groundswell of community support.” Carter said that many of the solutions and achievements were derived from a spirit of inclusion and community support. Applauding the Department’s commitment to transparency, St. Paul Deputy Mayor Anne Mulholland every department in the city should strive to imitate the department’s policies, practices and successes.

The report highlighted many ways the more inclusive and transparent HREEO model is working to benefit the community.

More accountability, better communication, and smarter use of resources are the central elements to the HREEO mission. More accountability represented the largest list of successful efforts. The report highlighted the founding of the EMS Academy to attract and train women and applicants of color for the St. Paul Firefighter exam. EMS professionals nationwide are predominantly white, and there are many barriers to prevent low-income city residents from becoming an EMT. The inaugural Fall Academy class enrolled 50 students of color, and graduated 21 students of color. All 21 students are now gainfully employed as EMT’s. “The program has had an incredible impact on the community, and we will now seek to expand outreach to include Native American youth,” the report said. Some of the Academy’s inaugural graduates were present wearing their handsomely adorned uniforms.

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Of particular interest to the small business community were the achievements made by the Central Certification Process (CERT) and the re-alignment of the Minority Business Development and Retention (MBDR) process for grant selection. The CERT program, which had previous backlogs of up to 6-8months, is now able to boast a backlog of under 30 days for certification response. This was done through the incorporation of hired interns and consultants. For the MBDR, Frias lauded the work of Angela Burkhalter, Communications Administrator/MBDR/Census (HREEO) Department, and business outreach forums held on KFAI with Insight News Editor in Chief Al McFarlane, as reasons for the strengthening of programs and communication of the restructured grant process.

Regarding better communication, the 2010 Census Team has performed remarkably to in confirming Census participation. "As of today, we have surpassed the 200 level of participation of 74%, but will push further to meet our goal of 80% which would place our district amongst the highest performing in the country," said Frias.

The restructuring of the Human Rights Investigation Process has been of high concern to the Twin Cities community. The Human Rights website has been redesigned to include more information regarding the investigation process and protections afforded by law. To date the transition appears to be successful in that equivalent levels of properly serviced cases have been achieved in comparison to pre-restructuring operations.

Overall HREEO communications have been improved through the addition of a 1400 recipient newsletter to update contractors, unions, and community member of new initiatives and accomplishments. Shared information and practices have allowed for smarter use of resources, and the creation of a Best Practices Officer will allow for a streamlined collection of efficient operations.