

Women's Foundation of California

## *Strengthening Policies through Women's Solutions*

STATEWIDE



**WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE A CRITICAL VOICE TOO OFTEN MISSING** in Sacramento and at the level of local policymaking. Women represent 51 percent of California's population and have historically been the problem-solvers in their families and communities. They have unique perspectives and skills to contribute to the policymaking process. Yet as of 2011, women make up just 25 percent of the elected positions at the county, state and federal levels. Not only are they missing as policymakers, they are missing as policy influencers. There is no level of policy in which women are well represented, be that policy design, decision-making or implementation. Even lobbying power on women's issues is concentrated within a small group.

The Women's Foundation of California, a statewide public foundation with a mission to create a California where women are healthy, safe and economically secure, recognized the need for the deliberate engagement of women in the legislative process. As a Foundation that focuses primarily on the needs of low-income, rural and immigrant women, it was clear that the exclusion of these women from the legislative process was having a negative effect on the health and safety of their communities. With a grant portfolio focused on supporting systematic change, the Foundation realized that their grant partners needed to learn how to directly influence public policy.

In 2003, the Foundation developed the Women's Policy Institute (WPI), a nine-month training fellowship in policy advocacy. The program trains community and nonprofit leaders from across the state. Fellows range in age from 20-70 years old, and represent various organizations, ethnicities, geographies, issue areas, and policy advocacy experience. This diversity was a priority from the beginning.

Fellows attend four retreats in Sacramento where they learn the inner workings of public policy. They learn how to write legislation, testify at public hearings, influence the state budget process, and work with the opposition. The structure of WPI allows fellows to stay engaged in their local



“My experience at WPI means I will have so many resources to draw upon. WPI was where I learned about state commissions. When I saw the redistricting commission opportunity, I knew it was a long shot but felt that I had something to offer and that I would have a lot of support.”

—CONNIE GALAMBOS MALLOY

FORMER WPI FELLOW &  
INAUGURAL MEMBER OF CA CITIZEN'S REDISTRICTING COMMISSION

communities while applying their new skills and knowledge to a policy action project.

To date WPI has graduated more than 200 women leaders who possess powerful lobbying skills that help them strengthen their organizations and communities.

WPI fellows have advocated for legislation for safer cosmetics, increased measures addressing violence in the workplace and expanded protections for non-citizen victims of trafficking, domestic violence and other serious crimes. Since 2003, 12 bills championed by WPI fellows have become laws that benefit all Californians.

Fellows do more than pass legislation. They develop relationships between grassroots activists and others working on policy, including policymakers, and government and agency staff members. They gain unprecedented influence around the issues affecting their communities. Policymakers know the fellows by name and officials return their phone calls because they know they bring deep community-based expertise and relationships, work hard and increase the civic engagement of their constituents.

The majority of fellows continue doing policy work after they graduate from WPI. For example, in Los Angeles, Strela Cervas, a WPI alumna and coordinator with the California Environmental Justice Alliance, partnered with Communities for a Better Environment and helped lead the defeat of a proposition that would have rolled back environmental regulations.

Some participants have taken the WPI curriculum and adapted it for use with their own constituents. Real Alternatives for Youth in LA has modified the curriculum to teach young people about public policy. Several fellows have translated sections of the curriculum into Spanish. WPI has also become an inspiration for other women's funds. Women's Funds in Rhode Island and New Jersey have already replicated the model and the Foundation received funding to provide technical support for replication to organizations in five states.

The Women's Policy Institute has tapped the deep hunger possessed by everyone to have a say in matters that affect personal destinies and the lives of loved ones. As a result, women leaders throughout California have come together, taught and learned from one another, forged unlikely alliances, and determined policy priorities. Together they are creating a more just and equitable society.

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**WOMEN'S FOUNDATION OF CALIFORNIA:** *The Women's Foundation of California is a statewide public foundation that exclusively invests in women and girls throughout California. The Foundation prioritizes work with women of color, immigrant women, single mothers, elder women, low-income, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
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Women's Foundation of  
California

[www.womensfoundca.org](http://www.womensfoundca.org)

Women's Policy Institute  
[www.womensfoundca.org/  
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