

Great Lakes Women's Leadership Campaign

In the Great Lakes Basin, as in other parts of the country and the world, toxic contaminants impact our health and community in seemingly subtle ways. Unfortunately, as more contaminants are dumped unchecked into the system the impacts are dispersed more broadly and become more difficult to correct.

It is our belief that while environmental problems have typically been isolated from other issues by decision-makers, they impact at least four facets of our community. These include education, health, public safety and economics. More serious attention must be given to how large a role the condition of our ecosystem plays in the condition of our community. The connections must be clearly made between our actions and behaviors and their impacts over the long-term.

The Great Lakes Leadership Network, a coalition of organizations, will initiate a long-term Network to integrate environmental stewardship into societal and economic decision-making in the Great Lakes Basin. It will be a catalyst to building alliances between a wide spectrum of groups and associations that share a common interest.

The Network will target leaders across the Great Lakes Basin who are working to improve public health, build a sustainable economy, and improve education and public safety in their communities. In other words these individuals are working towards a "sustainable society." This will be a bi-national effort. It will work to identify and provide evidence of the links between the environment and the various sectors of our communities. In addition, these activists will work with others in their community to integrate the Network's recommendations into the mainstream policy and decision-making processes.

Every day some other bad news substantiates our growing concern. Most recently was the finding of a correlation between DDE levels in breast tissue with breast cancer and the link between dioxin in bleached tampons with endometriosis in women. Other studies indicate that toxic contamination influences children's development and restricts their abilities to learn at normal rates, and the rising costs of health care seem to correspond with the rising number and variety of environmentally related health problems around the Great Lakes Basin.

Additionally, economic issues and poverty of women and children cannot be ignored. Local economies of scale could enable women to foster community development and community economics which will lead to healthy self-sufficient communities throughout the Basin. We all realize that children are the future problem solvers of our communities and educators feel a great responsibility to provide them with adequate training for the future. From the perspective of health professionals the medical community lacks a sophisticated awareness of environmental health issues and lacks the skills and resources necessary for diagnosis and treatment of persons with illnesses caused by contaminated environments.

Historically, the decisions for the paths taken in building our communities have been primarily based on narrow economic grounds laid out by male dominated committees. Despite increased recognition of the need for new policies which promote sustainable societies, surprisingly little progress has been made by policymakers in crafting concrete strategies to address the dual task of sustaining the environment and promoting social and economic betterment. With a tradition of cooperation and community involvement, women can be a powerful force for change and can provide the organizing skills and leadership necessary to accomplish concrete environment and

development objectives.

The exclusion of women from effective participation in policy-making forums has at least two serious consequences: it prevents the full range of women's concerns from being adequately understood and addressed; and it ignores the considerable skills which women can bring to shaping a sustainable society. With the needs of women and children more urgent than ever, their involvement in community action more prevalent and expanding, and government at all levels tardy in embracing new policies, the time is both right and critical for a program to mobilize and empower women to promote sustainable and equitable environmental strategies, to advocate for them, and to cooperate in realizing them.

The Network will develop a "blue print" for community leaders to follow as they make decisions on the future of their "piece" of the ecosystem. Within five or ten years we hope to have strong regional policies in place based on maintaining a healthy ecosystem as well as a healthy economy.

In addition, there will be a leadership development component to aid participants in speaking clearly, confidently, factually and effectively in order to influence policy changes to resolve ecosystem problems. The leadership development component of this campaign will provide participants with knowledge and skills to be influential on policy-making at the community, state and regional levels. They will then take the message back to their own communities and spread it across the basin through grass roots organizing, media relations, and communications with government agencies and elected officials.

The Network will maintain communications between communities to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the overall program.

The agenda and program will be produced in a report and disseminated to organizers and decision-makers around the Basin. Included in the report will also be a check list to guide community leaders in successfully implementing the Network's program.

FIRST TWO FACT FINDING MEETINGS.

We are looking specifically for women who are knowledgeable in a particular area, and who can provide "evidence" of the links discussed in the above summary. Where we are not able to identify women we are happy to take the next best thing - children, I mean men.

These first two meetings will consist of brainstorming to clearly identify the links between the environment and the many other pieces of our societies. We will also discuss what the future may hold in terms of new information. It is critical that the people participating in these first two meetings have specific information to offer. In other words, we will be counting on these individuals to provide us with the "proof" of links for presentation to the full Network in August, 1994. Where there is no good information supporting our assumptions of links, we must identify those gaps as well.

The first meeting will be held in Detroit, Michigan from December 10-12. We will convene on December 10 at 3:00 pm and adjourn on December 12 at noon. Scholarships are available for funding assistance, so please contact Kathy Bero at 414-271-5059 for more information.