



A Center of the Public Health Institute

## Delivering Customized Technical Support

Christina Zapata, Executive Director

Centro Laboral de Graton (The Graton Day Labor Center) – Graton, CA

Christina Zapata became Centro Laboral de Graton’s first executive director shortly before participating in the ODS program. “When we were selected to participate [in the ODS program], we filled out an organizational assessment.” Christina and her technical support provider discussed findings from the organizational assessment and identified some key areas for growth. According to Christina, “We were a grassroots organization with volunteers and board members doing all of the work. I was the first executive director, so we needed to better define the roles. Everyone gets along, but [the board] had to adjust to having an executive director.”

**“We were a grassroots organization with volunteers and board members doing all of the work. What emerged was our need for role clarification between the executive director and the board.”**

*- Christina Zapata, Executive Director  
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For Christina, the customized technical assistance was tremendously valuable. Christina shared that having someone to talk to about important issues who “didn’t have the judgment or who wasn’t involved in the day-to-day operations” was so valuable. She added, “Often, it doesn’t feel appropriate to discuss sensitive issues with the board or the staff. The ODS support person is a sounding board with good advice and it really helped that our conversations were confidential.”

Christina shared that they had one very successful on-site session with their technical support provider and afterwards, she and the board requested additional sessions. Though the additional sessions fell outside of the standard ODS year, Christina said the technical support provider was flexible enough to accommodate their request. One session covered

board committee structures while other sessions focused on strengthening the board and creating a more successful organizational structure overall. Christina added, “This whole process with the board can be very sensitive because they’ve devoted their hearts and souls to the organization.” When asked how the board was faring with all the change, Christina reported that, “about eighty percent are extremely receptive, almost like they’ve been waiting for this change to happen. The other twenty percent are still adjusting.”

Christina described how she has changed over the last year. “I’ve been an executive director just over one year and I’m finally getting it. I had a lot of support and it’s been a pleasant experience.” Christina added that another significant change in her leadership was her ability to communicate with the board about expectations and feedback. She added, “The ODS program helped me realize that it’s not personal. We need to look at what’s best for the Center. Communication can be very hard. So many things can be unclear.”

When asked about the changes in her organization over the last year, Christina pointed to “getting the board more engaged in evaluating their role,” as one of the biggest accomplishments. “We have very committed board members, but as an organization we needed to look at how we functioned as a board with paid staff.” Better defining the board and executive director’s roles is

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very common for organizations founded by a board of directors and Centro Laboral de Graton was no exception. Their technical support provider helped them think through What is the board's role versus the executive director's role? How do board members exclusively carry out a governance role? What governance structure will work best for the organization? Christina added, "When we started the ODS program, I would describe our organization as feeling things out, taking baby steps, feeling hesitant or cautious. Now I would describe us as growing with confidence and trust."

When asked if she would consider working with the Center for Civic Partnerships again, Christina emphatically replied, "Yes, I'll be their spokesperson!" She added, "There are other [technical support] groups who focus on volume. The Center focuses on longer-term relationships and having specific impact. When I say specific impact, I mean what's going to work for us. The staff members were very culturally-aware and sensitive. My technical support person in particular was very sensitive to what we needed. For example, he was very open and supportive of our need to have bilingual meetings."

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