



A Center of the Public Health Institute

## **Bolstering Emerging Leaders**

Wenonah Valentine, Executive Director  
Pasadena Birthing Project – Los Angeles, CA

Wenonah first learned about the Organizational Development Services (ODS) program when she attended a conference sponsored by The California Wellness Foundation. “As we were wrapping up the first year of our grant, I saw the ODS program as an opportunity to maximize the tools I needed to fully utilize the grant. I recognized that the Center for Civic Partnerships was part of a family that I already had a relationship with. I was an alumna of the Women’s Health Leadership program run by the Center for Collaborative Planning.” The Center for Collaborative Planning is also a Center of Excellence, like the Center for Civic Partnerships, under a parent organization called the Public Health Institute.

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Wenonah described what her organization was like at the time she began participating in the ODS program. “When we wrote the proposal [to The California Wellness Foundation], I was thinking about certain things. When the grant came, our priorities changed and I felt it was important for the organization to have a physical space. Looking back on it today, that was the smartest move I made because it took us out of the perception that we didn’t have a home.” Wenonah commented that the physical move into their own space mirrored changes within the organization. “We grew into our mission statement. When we were in Pasadena, we weren’t serving some of the communities that needed our services the most. Our vision got wider.” Wenonah added, “The strategic plan from 2004 – 2005 had become obsolete. I knew things needed to change.” Wenonah described that time in the organization as, “between who we were and where we were going.”

During the year that Wenonah was in the ODS program from 2007-2008, she and the Pasadena Birthing Project underwent tremendous change. The physical move to Downtown Los Angeles from Pasadena opened up new and significant relationships. The organization gained much greater visibility which fueled a fast rate of growth for Wenonah as the executive director and for her organization in general. Wenonah recounted how important it was to have support from the ODS program during this time. “I needed somebody to coach me because I was at the seat of all this change.”

Wenonah was already familiar with aspects of the ODS program that were similar to the Women’s Health Leadership program. According to Wenonah, “ODS followed a similar style to the Women’s Health Leadership program which was year-long, had coaching support, and created a sequestered and safe place to talk. It allowed us to talk out loud.” In addition to the coaching and peer support, Wenonah also appreciated receiving technical assistance on an important area of financial management. Wenonah’s support person connected her with another member of the CCP team with financial expertise. By working with another member of the team, she got the tools and assistance to put together a budget for a conference.

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By the end of the ODS program in 2008, the Pasadena Birthing Project gained greater national visibility, and Wenonah successfully built strategic alliances with distinguished university members and

cultivated relationships with experts in the field. Wenonah was invited to speak at a national summit on Black infant mortality and was asked to be “the voice of the community.” Wenonah said, “I had a business background, so I had to learn the language of developmental professionals. I learned that what I do is called translational research.” She remarked on how fortuitous the timing of the ODS program was. “I knew I needed help and needed to add more professional development and ODS was right there when all of this was going on. In my thirteen-year career, I felt that it was the most helpful support. It was a significant year of change and I [am thankful] that ODS was there to hold my hand.”

Now almost a year after her formal relationship with the ODS program ended, Wenonah reflected on the changes in her leadership that she can attribute to the ODS program. She said that after the program ended, she immediately put into practice what she learned. “I started looking around and asked everyone for what I needed. For example, I wanted to continue having quarterly check-ins with my ODS [technical support provider].” She said that the ODS program also gave her the confidence and the model to take advantage of other opportunities as well. “My strategic planning/communications advisor said that someone wanted to interview me from the magazine for the National Black MBA Association. I did a feature interview and through my connection with the organization, we were able to recruit new board members.” She added that she has taken advantage of other professional development opportunities and has participated in over a hundred hours of professional development since January 2009.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the ODS program for Wenonah was the transformation in herself as a leader. “I spent thirteen years not owning my ideas and my decisions. I had to fight to get my ideas done.” With the help of the ODS program, Wenonah shared, “I started to own the decisions that I made. I didn’t have to apologize for expanding the wings of the organization.” She added, “There were certain things I was ‘dumbing down’, but I realized that I cannot let people intimidate me anymore. It was very much a growth process for me.”

When asked what made the ODS program so successful, Wenonah responded, “They have a style of leadership where they make room for us. They bolster emerging leaders. They are experts at bringing different leaders together. I was fascinated by being in a small enough group where I got to meet and learn from people in rural areas. You get a mix of people and we get to talk about who we are without judgment. Now that I have a year past, the program sent me on my way and I’m so happy. Whenever I talk with my peers about peer learning, we don’t need to be in a class. We just need something that will help us have perspective.” She concluded by sharing her praise for the ODS program. “I applaud them. They’ve meant everything to me. They had room for my personality because I needed to talk it out. I didn’t have to play the cards close to my chest. I learned to extend myself without fear.”