



Expression, Brazilian style. Presenters from the Brazilian community spoke to SMLS staff at a recent Diversity Coalition cultural competence workshop. Left-right: Juliane Lima of Metro West Latin American Center, Regina Bertoldi of the Somerville School System and Ana Maria Ferdaus of the VNA Care Network. Photos by Ken Martin.

Cultural competence key to effective advocacy

By Colleen Daley and Myra Hindus

The clients of legal services are from many ethnic backgrounds. To increase cultural competence within Legal Services and deepen appreciation and support of staff diversity within programs, the Diversity Coalition began offering culturally specific workshops at seven programs around the state this spring. The workshops are designed to help legal services advocates serve diverse client communities more effectively, first by increasing awareness of different cultures, and second by building stronger ties and bridges to these communities.

Each workshop provides information on a particular community, its legal system, culture and history, while promoting a dialogue between the community and legal services. For example, workshops on Haitian Creole culture were held in Brockton at Southeastern Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, in Cambridge at Community Legal Services and

Counseling Center and in Boston at Legal Advocacy and Resource Center. All three of these programs have significant Haitian populations that they wanted to learn to better serve and understand. As Lynn and Lowell have rapidly growing Cambodian populations, workshops on Cambodian culture were held for Neighborhood Legal Services in Lynn and for Merrimack Valley Legal Services in Lowell. A Brazilian workshop was held at South Middlesex Legal Services in Framingham, where it is estimated that over 50,000 Brazilians reside. Finally, a Vietnamese workshop is planned for mid-December in Worcester for the Massachusetts Justice Project and the Legal Assistance Corporation of Central Massachusetts.

For each of the workshops the Diversity Coalition chose two presenters, who were generally social service workers as well as leaders and members of the community. They conducted half-

day workshops examining the history, migration patterns, language and response to the legal system of a culture that the programs wished to serve in a more culturally competent way. Most workshops also showcased the cuisine and musical tradition of the country, treating participants to ethnic food and entertaining them with music or videos specific to that culture.

One of the most productive developments of the workshops was the inclusion of other members of the cultural community in the events of the day. For example, the Brazilian workshop in Framingham brought in almost as many members of the Brazilian community as there were legal services staff members attending the training. Not only did this give the SMLS staff a much more well rounded view of Brazilian culture, attitudes and viewpoints, it also gave the Brazilian social service providers a great opportunity to understand

the work that legal services performs on a more personal level. By the end of the meeting a legal services staff member had volunteered to give a talk to the domestic violence project of one of the Brazilian community organizations.

The Cambodian workshop in Lynn had similar results, as it was held at the Community Minority Cultural Center, directly upstairs from the Khmer Youth and Family Project (KYFP). Many KYFP staff members were present to lend their expertise on Cambodian culture and to lend a hand to the NLS staff who were trying to reach out to more Cambodian clients -- through word-

of-mouth and advertising on Cambodian TV, radio and newspapers. The NLS staff was developing ways to reach out to the Cambodian community, perhaps through Cambodian TV, but they needed help as to where to start. Ratha Paul Yem, one of the presenters, and the executive director of the Cambodian American League of Lowell, gave them a name of someone who hosted a local Cambodian TV show who could definitely help them...himself! It was moments such as this that made the workshops so worthwhile -- moments when the personal connections are made, and strengthened, between legal services staff who want to reach out but do not know where to go

and those who deal with populations who are in need of legal services and do not have access to them.

Each of the workshops had its own flavor. Both literally -- in the form of delicious Cambodian, Brazilian, or Vietnamese food -- and figuratively, through the range of personal stories, history and helpful hints woven throughout the workshops by presenters



Ana Carla Laidley of Women's Protective Services draws a laugh.

and community members alike. However, despite differences in the cultures, it became obvious after completing this exploration series of the four different cultures that there were also many similarities between Cambodia, Brazil, Haiti and Vietnam. These four seemingly disparate, non-Western cultures share values such as a focus on family vs. independence, the importance of cooperation vs. competition and the priority of non-verbal communication

over verbal as well as many other values.

One final lesson that the Diversity Coalition learned from organizing these workshops was that the true work begins once the actual day of training ends. The next steps, including outreach through underutilized community publications and radio/TV stations, identifying interpreter services, hiring staff members

from that particular community, etc., are ongoing and require a great deal of time and effort on the part of legal services staff. In other words, the individual programs need to pick up where the Diversity Coalition has left off and take the initiative in promoting diversity and

cultural competence in their service to clients.

Colleen Daley is assistant to the director and Myra Hindus is director of the Diversity Coalition.



SMLS attorney Steve Matthews takes in the presentation.