

"Low Income Women Celebrate New Family Center"
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Oakland, CA – The Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP), a multi-racial Oakland-based women's group with a different approach to economic justice for low-income families, is gearing up during International Women's Month to deliver marketable high technology computer skills to the poor.

WEAP is an Oakland-based non-profit active all over the nation. It is one of the few empowerment organizations led primarily by poor women, and is showcasing technology, training and support in its brand new Women and Family Center in downtown Oakland. The Center was made possible by a public-private partnership between WEAP, the city of Oakland and private corporations that believe in WEAP's vision for economic revitalization. The kickoff will be an open house celebration Friday, March 14, from 4 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at 449-15th Street in Oakland. Audrey Rice-Oliver, 1996 California Minority Woman Entrepreneur of the Year, will be the keynote speaker. Former Oakland City Councilwoman Dezie Woods-Jones will be the Mistress of Ceremonies.

The open house itself is an example of WEAP's innovative approach. It celebrates WEAP's purchase of a 4-story office building in the heart of downtown Oakland's future high-technology corridor. WEAP's purchase of the \$2.6 million profit-making office building, now renamed the Women's Atrium Building, is believed to be the first time that a non-profit group run by multi-racial women who are mostly low-income or no-income has used real estate ownership as a funding source for its social programs.

WEAP and the city of Oakland agreed to make the building a focus of cutting edge technology, computer and construction training and small business development. It is just two blocks from City Hall and right across the street from the new city administrative building now under construction. Oakland's Mayor, Elihu Harris, the U.S. Small Business Administration, Pacific Bell, Apple Computer, Hewlett Packard, the Community Services of the Oakland Housing Authority, the East Bay Conservation Core and other corporate and community supporters will be on hand.

"Our goal is for economic revitalization through new strategies aimed at constructing a new social contract from the bottom up," says WEAP Executive Director Ethel Long-Scott. Long-Scott, who has a national

reputation as a fighter for social justice, was invited to China as part of the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference. She co-chaired the African American Women's caucus of Third World Women striving to put together a joint and overarching statement of unity at the NGO meeting in Huiarou.

WEAP has a 14-year history of innovative support for low-income women and families who have been locked out of the mainstream economic system and pushed right through what little remains of the almost dismantled social safety net.

Its goal is to help low-income women create new opportunities for themselves, instead of accepting the judgement of some private companies and public policy makers that they are somehow different – and more disposable – than other out-of-work Americans. As part of that goal, WEAP pushed hard –and ultimately successfully – to have felony child endangerment charges dropped against a welfare mother whose 6-month-old accidentally drowned while she was taking a college class in an attempt to improve her job skills.

Programs that will be offered by the Women and Family Center include:

- * The Small Business Village, which offers office spaces, management training and business incubator services for up to 30 startup businesses that are promising, but still too small to grow successfully on their own.

- * Computer Telecommunications Skills Center, which offers training in the latest in high-tech equipment and software, to at risk low-income women and youth at minimum or not cost.

- * Meeting and Videoconferencing Facilities with flexible seating capacities up to 90.

- * Training programs: a variety of innovative and holistic approaches to teaching an upgrading skills. They will be modeled on WEAP's 1995 successful Construction Trades Training Program, which prepared people who had been homeless or were recovering from substance abuse to enter apprenticeship programs.

- * A Special Needs Empowerment Project, with wheelchair access to meet the special needs of people with disabilities.

These programs are being run from an 11,000 square foot second floor headquarters office that is unusual in design, and a tribute to WEAP's empowering approach of building volunteer teams that pool their skills to

successfully assemble goods and services that people do not have the financial resources to buy.

The unique combination of open workspaces, broad expanses of glass, unusual colors, faux-finishes, curved walls, movable partitions, murals, empowering wall slogans and color coordinated carpeting turned a drab set of low-ceiled conventional rooms into an interior design showplace. It was accomplished by persuading architects, interior designers, computer network specialists, construction trainees, writers and funding developers to volunteer at least part of their time in services of WEAP's needs.