

The Alive! Interview

Women's Commission: Women Making Progress, But ...

■ In June, Alive! CEO John Hawkins sat down with Paula Petrotta, Executive Director of the City's Commission on the Status of Women, to hear her thoughts on how far the status of women has come ... and how much is left to do.

Alive!: How would you describe what the Commission on Status of Women does?

Paula Petrotta: Because the Commission is so small, much of what we do is really about public policy. Many policies regarding sexual harassment, domestic violence and gender discrimination originated in the Commission office. We also carry out a program for young women at risk.

Commissions for Women were created under former President John F. Kennedy. There are approximately 240 commissions across the country. The City Commission was created in 1975 as an advisory committee to then-Mayor Tom Bradley. In 1980 the Commission became a permanent department of City government.

About two years ago, we embarked on probably the most important legislative policy initiative impacting women in this City's history. The Commission is implementing an international treaty – The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) at the local level.

What does that mean? The Commission has been mandated by the City Council to implement CEDAW. Implementation entails looking at public policy in the City of Los Angeles and how it relates to women and young women. How we allocate money to meet the needs of the 51 percent of the population in the City of L.A., which are women. We're going to be identifying how many women are at the table when it comes to developing public policy; how many women are promoted within the City ranks; and what kinds of programs do each of the departments have related to women and young women in the City of L.A. How are current policies that address discrimination working? How much money are we spending in judgments for sexual harassment and gender discrimination complaints?

The United States is one of the few countries in the world that has not ratified CEDAW, an unfortunate distinction along with the Sudan, Iraq and Iran.

The City of Los Angeles is the second City in the Country to implement what has been called the human rights bill for women.

In addition, the Commission delivers a very successful program to young women at risk, is implementing a human trafficking initiative, has written a report on domestic violence in Los Angeles and is currently developing a report on the Status of Women in Los Angeles.

NEEDING TO GROW

Alive!: How many people work for the Commission?

Paula Petrotta: Twelve. Six of whom run the Young Women from Adversity to Resilience Program (YWAR).

Alive!: Is that enough?

Paula Petrotta: No, unequivocally, no.

Alive!: What's enough?

Paula Petrotta: We're the second city in the country to implement CEDAW. The City of San Francisco has embarked on this, and they have six or seven people doing this full-time. The Commission has one person. The timely implementation of CEDAW is important not only to eliminate discrimination if it exists but also to mitigate costly discrimination complaints.

The City spends millions of dollars on the adjudication and judgments for complaints. I know a couple of years ago, the City spent upwards to \$7 million for two sexual harassment complaints and one race discrimination complaint, so we're spending money. It's not like we're not. What we want to do is put some stopgap measures in where we're not doing well.

WORKING INSIDE AND OUT

Alive!: You mentioned internal/external. Sexual discrimination would be internal, relating to City employees?

Paula Petrotta: Right, yes.

Alive!: And external would be?

Paula Petrotta: The mayor is about to pass a \$6.5 billion budget. How much of that money goes to women and young women? Externally, we're going to be looking at that. For instance, the Federal government passed Title IX, which relates to young women in sports. The City of L.A. was sued because many of our soccer fields were more accessible to boys than to girls' teams. Some years ago the City was the subject of a class action suit because of its poor response to domestic violence. We are trying to be proactive and not reactive.

We've begun a pilot program with Aging and the Convention Center, and now we're tweaking what is called a gender analysis survey. That's going to be our tool to go into the departments and see how well they're doing, if they need any help. It's not meant to be the "big stick." A lot of departments are doing a lot of great things. We want to have those departments work with us and with an advisory council that we're putting together of community people. Sometimes as City employees we're too close to it. We need to talk to the community, find out what's happening and get their perspective.

Alive!: So you do both with 12 people.

Paula Petrotta: Well, one person.

Alive!: One person working on the CEDAW?

Paula Petrotta: Right.

Alive!: What percent of your time is spent working with the public, and what percent with the City itself?

Paula Petrotta: It's hard to say, because we are very different from most departments. The Commission publishes a directory of over 400 services for women. Last year, we received about 13,000 calls for domestic violence referral.

Alive!: In one year?

Paula Petrotta: Yes.

Alive!: And that's from the public?

Paula Petrotta: Yes, but we also receive calls from City employees. The Commission

co-wrote the Domestic Violence Workplace Policy and chairs the Domestic Violence Resource Team (DVRT). DVRT intercedes on behalf of City employee if that person can prove for instance that poor work performance is due to a domestic violence situation. We also work with the Department to assure that the workplace is safe. We have provided training to City employees and supervisors on how to recognize and address domestic violence.

We also have an L.A. woman's show that airs on Channel 35 every Monday. We won an Emmy for it. Depending on what the subject is – particularly as it relates to violence or the problems of young women, we will get a lot of calls from the public.

FIGHTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Alive!: You're taking a lot of the things you were doing previously and putting them under one umbrella and attaching a process.

Paula Petrotta: Right. Human trafficking, however, is new to us, even though it's not new to the rest of the world. Article 6 of CEDAW states that parties to this international treaty must take appropriate measures to suppress all forms of traffic in women. But in the United States, it wasn't something that was on our radar screen, certainly not in Los Angeles. But according to recent FBI statistics, at least 17,000 – and some people believe that to be a very low number – of women, many times young women, are being trafficked to the United States every year.



Paula Petrotta

Executive Director, L.A. City Commission on Status of Women

GREW UP IN:
Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles

MARRIED TO:
Gary Mattingly, Retired General Manager, Fire and Police Pensions

FAVORITE QUOTE:
"If the dogs are barking at your heels, it means you're leading the pack."

FAVORITE CANDY:
Red licorice.

FAVORITE MOVIE:
Witness for the Prosecution.

FAVORITE MUSIC:
"I hate to say this: acid rock. I'm from the '70s. What can I say? I love The Who, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin."

HERO: "My mother, Sarah, absolutely. She was a strong woman, really a woman before her time. And she taught me everything I know, absolutely, unequivocally."

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Alive! Is this an entry point for that?

Paula Petrotta: L.A. is a major point of transit. Think about LAX, the Port, and how close we are to the Mexican border. We are even now meeting with a coalition of 200 organizations, which includes the FBI and Homeland Security, as well as community organizations, to look at this problem. One of the sad parts about human trafficking victims is that generally, if they are found, they're very hesitant to come forward because they've been threatened that they will be killed or their family will be killed. Many times there is a language barrier when the victim is from another country. And there's a huge need for shelter for victims and services. Trafficking victims may stay in this country for 18 months or more if they're going to testify, unlike domestic violence shelters where a victim will for 30 days. The LAPD has told us that they have had to house trafficking victims in jails because there was no shelter for them.

The more we delve into human trafficking, the scarier it is. Human trafficking is the third-largest business in the country, second only to drugs and guns. Traffickers are scary people who are becoming much more sophisticated in how they recruit, terrorize and use their victims. This is big business, so we need to work together. If you don't have the victims testifying against their traffickers, they're back in business.

STOPPING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Alive! Do you work with Personnel on sexual harassment issues?

Paula Petrotta: The Personnel Department files formal sexual harassment complaints. That is their job. The Commission does not have an investigative team. We provide advocacy: If somebody comes to the Commission and we can resolve their complaint without going to the formal process, we want to do that. Now obviously, if it's egregious, a formal process is required. But if we can stop the harassment, alert the department and make the employee comfortable and productive, we want to do that.

Since I've been here, I've handled more than 70 cases, most of which have not gone on to formal investigation. You know as well as I do that once you start that process, it begins to ratchet up the cost for the City. My understanding is that it can cost upwards of \$35,000 to \$40,000 just to litigate. That's not including a judgment. This is the cost to the City that we want to prevent.

Also, we want to be sure that the women – generally it's a woman, although we have had men – feel safe and whole and productive again. That's really the point. Most people just don't file complaints out of the blue.

We just issued a sexual harassment survey so we can get a barometer on what's happening in the City of L.A. When I did this in 1991, we

“People need to understand, both public and internal, that sexual harassment is a crime. It's a violation of Title 7, the Civil Rights Act. It is not just this kind of mamby-pamby stuff. It's a crime and people need to know that, whether they're City employees or whether they're not.”

— Paula Petrotta

had more than 5,000 respondents, which is good when you consider we only had about 11,000 women in the City of L.A. Despite what people think, only 30 percent of our workforce in L.A. [is women]. Almost half, 37 percent, had had a sexual harassment incident within the past year. That was a huge number and a huge surprise.

So at that time, we reissued the sexual harassment executive directive. We put some more teeth in it. We worked with the Mayor's Office and Personnel at that time, and I had just come on to the Commission. That was one of the first things we did.

HAVE QUESTIONS? NEED ADVICE?
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(213) 978-0300

This [recent] survey was a means to identify progress we made. We have. Eighty percent of the respondents this time around – there were about 3,000 to 4,000 – had not had any sexual harassment issues, but there was still that 20 percent that did. We want to go back and look at what some of the issues are, what are we not doing as well as we could be doing. If we can stop it at the root, sometimes we can just stop it, period. You're never going to change some people's behavior.

Departments are supposed to have sexual harassment counselors. That has fallen by the wayside in many cases. We have found that most employees don't know whom their department counselor is or if in fact a department does have a sexual harassment counselor. And I find that many times people are uncomfortable going to their own department. It's people who know each other, and they're uncomfortable with that, especially if [the behavior is] at a level that's really egregious.

We have other serious issues as well. We actually had an attempted rape. We have heard of problems with the public at City public counters.

Alive! The public harassing the City employees.

Paula Petrotta: Yes, We want to go back and look at how the City contracts for services and whether these providers are aware of the City's sexual harassment policy. These contractors – and the public – need to understand that sexual harassment is a crime. It's a violation of Title 7, the Civil Rights Act. It is not just this kind of namby-pamby stuff. It's a crime and people need to know that, whether they're City employees or whether they're not.

ONGOING ISSUES

Paula Petrotta: One of the interesting things is that we got back 2,600 surveys that were not filled out. We didn't send them individually to women. We sent them to Departments. So it appears that were we being sent a message. We know the Fire Department, Police Department and the Planning Department did not get any.

Alive! They came back just in bunches, like stacks?

Paula Petrotta: Yes. Somebody took the time to send them back to us. I'm not a psychologist, but it just seemed strange to me. Why would somebody take the time? Why not just dump them? I don't know if we're backsliding in the City.

I have recommended that the City hire a Sexual Harassment Ombudsperson. I know

certain Departments – Personnel, Fire and Police – have ombudspersons. But I am talking about someone who is not in the chain of command, someone who can be independent and have a direct line to the Mayor and City Council. The Fire Department is a good example of why this is needed. We received an anonymous letter about discriminatory actions relating to women and minorities in the Fire Department. I also happened to run into someone in the mall who talked to me about it. This is not the way to do business. It tells me that people are either uncomfortable, not familiar with the process, or do not have any

faith in the process that these kinds of things are slipping out this way.

One of the things that I think is very helpful – and it would be great to have it in *Alive!*, because people do read your paper – is that sexual harassment is serious and has serious implications in the work place.

WOMEN'S CHALLENGES

Alive! What is the biggest challenge facing a woman City employee today?

Paula Petrotta: Being in the track for promotion. While we have come along way, we do not have parity with our own workforce and most of our female employees are still segregated in the clerical fields. We're not promoting women within. We're not. For the most part, they are still not at the table where public policy is made and where major decisions are made. Some departments do better than others.

Alive! Does it help to have a General Manager being a woman? Have you noticed a difference there?

Paula Petrotta: I think it does and we as a City are doing so much better now than ever before. However, women's issues are considered soft issues, so sometimes women do not want to align themselves in that manner. You want to play the boys' game, because clearly, that's what it still is.

THE FUTURE

Alive! Where do you want the Commission to be in the future?

Paula Petrotta: I would like the City to really embrace CEDAW. I mean embrace it and move it forward. Some City agencies are resistant to the spirit of CEDAW and its implementation. They feel it's going to be costly, or they feel [the Commission] should not be in a position to audit departments. I disagree. Again, I don't want to say we're going to be the “big stick,” but somebody has to look at how well we're doing or not. Because I have been with the City over 30 years, I have a historical knowledge of how things used to be and while they are certainly much better, women's rights are being challenged on all levels of government. Thus, it is imperative that we remain vigilant.

I don't want departments thinking, “Oh, here they come again.” Many City departments have great programs for women and young women and we want to highlight and possible use as models for other departments where appropriate.

Alive! In five years, how many employees will you have?

Paula Petrotta: Because we represent 51 percent of the population, the largest constituency, I really think that our resources should reflect the job and the constituency. It is unrealistic to think that it can and should be done with the small staff that we currently have. While I know that women tend to be the volunteers of this world, it is unfair to think that we should volunteer our time to support what rightfully should be part of the City's overall plan to address the needs of its constituency.

YOUNG WOMEN IN SCHOOL

Alive! Tell us about the Young Women from Adversity to Resilience Program.

Paula Petrotta: YWAR is a school-based program and is featured in 13 high schools. Several years ago we received calls from both the County Department of Education and the



Juvenile Court System about the fact that they were seeing more young women coming through the juvenile justice system. A recent report showed a 125 percent increase in young girls committing more vicious crimes.

These agencies asked us to shed a light on this issue and we did. We worked with IIA to produce a documentary entitled *The Girl Next Door*. After interviewing young women in the juvenile camps, experts in the field of violence and others, we found that issues for young women were different than young men. Further, there were virtually no programs addressing the needs of young women ages 14 and 19. Most people, most funders, want to give money to younger children, middle school children. That's cute and fuzzy and preventative. But our young women are leaving high school and are out on the streets without any safety net. What are we doing for them? Very little.

We also found out there were few gender-specific programs in California. Two studies from major universities showed that one-size-fits-all programs do not work. To be effective, prevention and at risk programs for young women must address the uniqueness of their lives, their problems. We applied for and won a grant from the state and began the only program like this in the State of California. We are in 13 schools now and hope to expand. We have received stellar reviews from the County that administers the grant and our evaluation. This June we will graduate over 200 students. I am very proud of this program and have been fortunate to see it from the beginning to where it is now.

IN THE END, ADVOCATES

Alive! For the City employee, how do you want them to see you?

Paula Petrotta: I want them to see us as advocates for them. I want them to see us as a department that advocates for them as a City employee – women and men as well – as a member of our community, and a City family member. We want an A-plus city for women and young women. That's our goal.

Alive! Thank you!