

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—
NOMINATION OF MICHAEL GARCIA

Mr. McCONNELL. As in executive session, I ask unanimous consent that when the Governmental Affairs Committee reports the nomination of Michael Garcia (PN 451), to be Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security, the nomination then be sequentially referred to the Judiciary Committee for a period not to exceed 15 days of session; provided further that if the nomination is not reported by that time, the nomination be automatically discharged and placed on the calendar.

Mr. President, I withdraw that request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The request is vitiated.

WOMEN'S BUSINESS CENTERS
PRESERVATION ACT OF 2003

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 1247.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will state the bill by title. The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1247) to increase the amount to be reserved during FY2003 for sustainability grants under section 29(1) of the Small Business Act.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Ms. SNOWE. Mr. President, I rise in support of the "Women's Business Centers Preservation Act of 2003" in recognition of the critical need to preserve the operations of existing Women's Business Centers currently serving women entrepreneurs in almost every state and territory. I am pleased to be joined in offering this bill by Senator KERRY, Ranking Member, Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Senators BOND, CANTWELL, BURNS, LEVIN, ENZI, GRASSLEY, BAUCUS, DOMENICI, and BINGAMAN.

While I am totally supportive of the Administration's efforts to add new centers to serve a broader constituency, I am very concerned that we may lose valuable resources established in rural and urban areas. The value of the Women's Business Center Program is stated best by the text taken from the Small Business Administration's (SBA) promotional materials on the Women's Business Center Program:

Each women's business center is uniquely designed to serve the needs of its individual community and to place special emphasis on helping those who are economically disadvantaged.

The Women's Business Center Program has become a strong and effective part of the SBA's entrepreneurial-development efforts.

And—

In tough economic times, when both employment and funding resources are harder to come by, support for the WBC Program is more important than ever.

As Chair of the Small Business Committee, I totally agree with the SBA's assessment. In fact, Congress has

agreed six times since the program was introduced through the Small Business Ownership Act of 1988, and made permanent in 1997, that this program is critical for women-business owners. The program's appropriations has grown from \$2 million in 1989 to \$12 million in 2003, and the results have been impressive. In Fiscal Year 2002, for every dollar invested in the program, centers reported a return of \$161 in gross receipts of clients.

Even more remarkable is the fact that since 1997, the Women's Business Centers have served more than 240,000 women entrepreneurs. In Fiscal Year 2002, almost 86,000 customers were served through the centers. As reported in the SBA Performance and Accountability Report of 2002, "the WBC Program has more than doubled its goal of a 3 percent annual increase in the number of clients served in the past two years. This is due in large part to the success of the sustainability grants, which enable established centers to continue SBA funding. SBA expects this trend to continue as more centers become firmly established and as their reputations for excellence spread."

If we look at the centers that are achieving the greatest impact, it is the established centers. The results of their outreach and one-on-one assistance has made it possible for the Small Business Administration to achieve its goals as it measures the success of the products and programs offered by these centers.

It is true that this month only five Women's Business Centers face the possibility of closing their doors without the dollar-to-dollar matching funds that are provided through sustainability funding. The sustainability grant provisions reserve 30.2 percent of the \$12 million program funding for sustainability grants for existing centers with the balance of available funds designated for the creation and operation of new centers. Based on information provided by the SBA, there are not sufficient sustainability reserve funds to offer continuation contracts to five centers in Iowa, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas and Washington. Therefore, SBA has proposed a reduction in grants for all centers currently funded by sustainability grants. By increasing the reserve amount to 36 percent, only during Fiscal Year 2003, adequate funds will be available for eligible existing centers operating with sustainability grants.

Next year, there will be more than 20 States and the U.S. Virgin Islands affected by the lack of funding to continue operations. Last month, I introduced the "Women's Small Business Programs Improvement Act of 2003", S. 1154, to correct deficiencies in the program and provide a fair, competitive process to operate and grow the Women's Business Center Program. I expect that bill will be taken up as part of the SBA reauthorization legislation my Committee will consider in July.

While we can fix the funding problem in the long-run, we still face a crisis

today. That is the reason for the bill I am introducing. By increasing the formula for sustainability grants from 30.2 percent to 36 percent, existing centers would be able to operate without disruption in funding and the programs and services currently offered in our communities. This provision will not require an additional appropriation, just a reallocation of current funds.

I believe this approach offers the best path available to sustain the centers approaching the end of their grant cycles without creating undue hardship for all existing centers. At the same time, it should not hinder the Administration's efforts to create new centers.

These centers have been extraordinarily successful in providing assistance to women in all walks of life—from those who once received public assistance but now operate businesses and create jobs, to women transitioning from employee to small business employer, to established women-business owners who create and manufacture products for sale at home and abroad. The Centers nurture women entrepreneurs through business and financial planning and help with critical issues like securing funding for startup and expansion. Yet—despite these successes—funding questions have long plagued the program.

I am committed to resolving the temporary funding crisis through the bill I introduce today and will work with my colleagues to ensure the long-term viability of the Women's Business Center program for today's women entrepreneurs and those of tomorrow.

Mr. KERRY. Mr. President, I rise today as Ranking Member of the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship with my esteemed colleague and Chair of the Committee, Senator SNOWE, to offer legislation to fix a funding gap that exists for meritorious Women's Business Centers that are graduating from the first stage of the program and entering the sustainability portion.

I would first like to thank Senator SNOWE for working very closely with me on this issue. Her leadership and support has been invaluable. I would also like to thank our House counterparts on the Small Business Committee, Chairman MANZULLO and Ranking Member VELÁZQUEZ, who have also been working diligently on the issue of sustainability grants as we take on the process of reauthorizing the majority of the SBA's programs. In addition, I want to thank all of the cosponsors of this legislation, all of which have shown resounding support for women entrepreneurs and recognize the positive impact all small businesses have on our national economy.

As I have said on more than one occasion, women business owners do not get the recognition they deserve for their contribution to our economy: Eighteen million Americans would be without jobs today if it weren't for