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New Jersey, Once One of the Worst, Now Nearing Nation's Top 10 for Women in State Legislature

With Nancy Muñoz selected on April 27th to represent New Jersey's 21st Assembly District, the Garden State's legislature will have the 11th highest proportion of women in the nation, according to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. New Jersey's legislature will include 10 women in the Senate and 27 in the Assembly, or 30.8% of the 120 legislators. Nationally, women are 24.3% of all state lawmakers.

"For a state that ranked 43rd as recently as 2004, this is a stunning improvement, putting us on the doorstep of the top ten," noted CAWP director Debbie Walsh. "Many of the state's leaders now understand that women make a difference, and they're joining our efforts to ensure that women are at the table when important decisions are made."

More women have stepped forward in recent years to offer themselves as candidates. CAWP's own campaign training program, Ready to Run™, has been one factor in expanding the pool of New Jersey women seeking and winning elective office. Among New Jersey state lawmakers, 19% have attended the program.

Walsh observed that some party leaders have also begun to look for women to fill vacancies or run for winnable seats. "The county political parties wield unusual strength in New Jersey, deciding which candidates will get the party 'line' on the ballot, with the important edge that status confers. When county chairs make efforts to offer balanced slates, citizens benefit from government that represents a broader range of interests." Still, Walsh said, continued effort is vital because the new ranking is precarious. With two women legislators not running for re-election, the state could slip back to a lower rank after November's contests.

Muñoz, a resident of Summit, will succeed her late husband, Dr. Eric Muñoz, who died on March 30. A nurse, Ms. Muñoz has been active in her community on health and education issues. She will fill out the remainder of her husband's term and run for a full term in November to represent the district that includes parts of Union, Essex, Morris and Somerset counties.

About CAWP

The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is a university-based research, education and public service center. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women's changing relationship to politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life. CAWP is a leading authority in its field and a respected bridge between the academic and political worlds.