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For Immediate Release
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Governor Announces Winners of the 28th Annual Virginia Hart Award

Madison—Governor Scott Walker announced today that Sylvia Cantu Smith, Training Officer with the Department of Administration, and Sharon Hunter, Education Program Supervisor at the Department of Public Instruction are the winners of the 2011 Virginia Hart Award. The Virginia Hart award is given annually to a woman in state government in honor of exemplary performance in public service that improves the quality of life for the people of Wisconsin.

Ms. Cantu Smith and Ms. Hunter were honored at a ceremony in the Senate Parlor of the State Capitol this afternoon. During the ceremony, Chief Justice Abrahamson praised the contributions of Virginia Hart and congratulated Ms. Cantu Smith and Ms. Hunter on their award.

Ms. Cantu Smith has been involved in a wide range of training activities to suit many interests, being creative in bringing quality training and educational workshops at little or no additional cost to the state. Recognizing the issues facing an aging workforce and the pressures of the current economy, she has developed training in the areas of health and wellness, professional development and financial literacy, resilience and dealing with change as state government faces significant budget challenges. Over the past twenty years, Ms. Cantu Smith has also been an active volunteer and community leader.

Ms. Hunter has led state programs that work with low-income students and families who have the potential to succeed in college. She fosters hope, and offers motivation and tools to make it in our economy. Although all state programs face difficulties at times with funding, she has actively and tirelessly worked to obtain financial and other resources from many avenues to keep the programs going and to offer even more services and opportunities for students and families. Ms. Hunter has made countless contributions to our state. Ms. Hunter is an active member in her community, respected for her work with education issues, students, professionals, her church and the county.

Eight employees received honorable mention at the ceremony. These employees include Jennifer Johnson, Kari Sanding, Joanne Stumpf, and Angela Wood, Department of Corrections; Christine A. Niehaus, Department of Natural Resources; Mary Jo Cleaver, Department of Public Instruction; and Gwen S. Carr and Jean Ann Stronach, Department of Transportation.

The awards were given in honor of Virginia Hart, Wisconsin's first woman cabinet member. Virginia Hart served as Secretary of the Department of Regulation and Licensing, chairperson of the Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations, and as chairperson of the Labor and Industry Review Commission. Upon her retirement from state service in 1983, friends and colleagues established a fund in her name for recognizing a woman in Wisconsin state service each year. On March 24, 2007, Virginia Hart passed away at the age of 92 but her legacy lives on through this award.

The Virginia Hart Special Recognition Award is administered by the Office of State Employment Relations.

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