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## Memorandum

**To:** Our Funding Partners and Community Stakeholders  
**From:** Linda X. Tortolero, President & CEO  
**Subject:** Current Status of MLEA Domestic Violence Program  
**Date:** April 9, 2020

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As a funding partner and community stakeholder of Mujeres Latinas en Acción, I would like to apprise you of COVID-19's impact on the daily programmatic activities, staff and survivors.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at [ltortolero@mujereslat.org](mailto:ltortolero@mujereslat.org) or Gil Zamora, Director of Development at [gzamora@mujereslat.org](mailto:gzamora@mujereslat.org) with any questions or ideas you may have.

### *Office Closures*

Until Friday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, Mujeres' Domestic Violence Program at our Pilsen headquarters and our North Riverside remained open from Monday – Friday 9AM – 5PM. Our Brighton Park satellite office, which is located within a federal qualified health clinic complex, closed on March 17<sup>th</sup> to reduce the risk of exposure. Program participants of the domestic violence program at Brighton Park were redirected to our other two sites. Signage at our Brighton Park also directed potential walk-in participants to our other two sites and Mujeres' phone line where they can be connected to our DV program staff was also listed.

After the Governor's "Stay at Home" executive order came into effect, Mujeres physical offices closed, effective March 21, 2020. We posted information on the front doors with our telephone number as well as Mujeres' 24 DV Hotline. Once the order is lifted on April 30<sup>th</sup> (or later, if it is extended), Mujeres leadership anticipates that social distancing practices in the office will continue. Mujeres' offices will reopen with minimal staff physically present to attend to the needs of walk-ins. We will look to the guidance of our government and health officials for best practices.

### *Staff Transition to Telework*

After the Governor's "Stay at Home" order, all DV Program staff began to work remotely. Mujeres' 40-hour DV trained team, including the receptionists, answer calls and connect callers with staff during office hours. DV staff have downloaded the 8x8 phone application on their cellphones which forwards calls from our office phone system. It also allows the DV program staff to call participants or colleagues from our office phone system. This allows all personal phone numbers to stay private.

Intake coverage continues to ensure that all callers are assisted immediately. DV staff has contacted ongoing participants to inform them that counseling will be provided by telephone. The team is working with their supervisors (via phone) to adjust plans and meeting accordingly. A program directive to all



staff stipulated that counselors, therapists and advocates should contact their ongoing participants weekly not only for one on one sessions or coaching but also to provide referrals to resources and other case management assistance.

### *Service Impact*

While our physical offices have closed, Mujeres has strived to continue providing our vital, culturally-competent support to survivors of domestic violence. Below are the pivots that have been made:

- Individual Counseling: All counseling sessions are now being conducted by telephone.
- Group Counseling: Suspended. All participants are being shifted over to individual counseling with either the group counseling facilitator or with other counselors.
- Community education: Suspended. Educator position is currently vacant as our past educator is now our Volunteer Supervisor. Exploring how community education and prevention of DV delivery can take shape in the instance of long-term tele-working scenarios.
- 24-hour DV Hotline In addition to DV staff, active volunteers and interns are assisting survivors and callers to find support during the pandemic.
- Crisis Intervention for those who contact the office during 9-5PM, the DV program staff is rotating intake availability, to assure survivors are promptly served.
- Volunteer management – The supervision of volunteers has been crucial, especially as we strive to connect survivors with community partners and essential resources (food, medicine, hygiene and cleaning supplies). Volunteer Supervisor is maintaining close contact with our partner universities and supporting interns to continue their internship experience at MLEA. University interns continue to actively sign up for DV hotline shifts as well as working on special research and projects. The latter is especially useful for our 42-hour DV training and the program as a whole.
- Court advocacy – Active orders of protection have been granted an automatic 30-day extension. For emergency orders of protection (EOPs), our court advocates are counseling survivors over the phone as well as coordinating ride share transportation to court appointments. They are also connected with the front desk of the courts and providing translation to monolingual Spanish speakers seeking emergency orders of protection. At the same time, court advocates are helping survivors to complete the EOP package and guide them through the legal system via phone.
- Mujeres consistently maintains contact with the courts as well as other legal aid partners and will see what other measures or pivots will need to be made to reduce risks of exposure to COVID19 to participants and Mujeres staff, while supporting DV survivors in pursuit of their legal rights.

The stress of the pandemic is requiring that our DV counselors provide emotional support to survivors of DV as well as other community members who have called Mujeres. Our counselors stay abreast of available community resources, such as food, medicine, hygiene and sanitation supplies. The need for shelter has spiked dramatically and Mujeres is working with The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence on this issue.



Once the “Stay at Home” executive order is lifted, Mujeres leadership will consider how best to commence activities that have been suspended while practicing social distancing. Understandably, these activities may need to be adjusted to best meet the needs of our participants while keeping everyone safe and healthy.

#### *Vicarious Trauma*

Providing counseling, therapy and legal advocacy for DV survivors has always been satisfying yet emotionally taxing work for domestic violence program personnel. Over the last three years, the toll on our DV staff has increased due to the precarious situation that undocumented immigrants and mixed status families anxiously face under the Trump administration.

Before COVID-19, Mujeres had begun to address the self-care needs of our staff including encouraging the use of sick time for mental wellbeing and a new employee assistance program that provides up to 5 mental health counseling sessions. Yet, COVID-19 affects everyone, and Mujeres leadership will be continuously mindful of our staff’s experiences with vicarious trauma over the pandemic’s course. It is our position that our funding partners should also consider supporting the needs of DV personnel who will serve increasing numbers of domestic violence survivors under even more challenging situations.