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Memorandum

To: Our Funding Partners and Community Stakeholders
From: Linda X. Tortolero, President & CEO
Subject: Current Status of MLEA Empresarias Del Futuro Program
Date: April 14, 2020

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 participants. This memo outlines the changes we've made to our entrepreneurship program, Empresarias Del Futuro.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at ltortolero@mujereslat.org, Fanny Cano, Development and Communications Manager at fcano@mujereslat.org, or Gil Zamora, Director of Development at gzamora@mujereslat.org which any questions or ideas you may have.

Office Closures

Until Friday, March 13th, Mujeres' Empresarias del Futuro (EDF) 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 17th to reduce the risk of exposure. EDF program participants 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 could reach our EDF 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 30th (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 – Engagement with Participants

While our physical offices have closed, Mujeres has strived to continue providing our vital, culturally-competent support to Empresarias. The EDF team is working closely with Program Director Alicia Espinosa (via phone) to adjust plans accordingly. A program directive to all Mujeres 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. The EDF staff initiated weekly individual check-in calls, where participants share needs and concerns.



EDF advocates began conducting individual coaching sessions to 70 participants via the following: Zoom, phone, Facebook messenger, and 8x8 app (our internet-based phone service). Participants dictate our coaching sessions and common topics include:

1. Small business crisis support
2. Education session recaps & overview
3. Social media engagement opportunities
4. Scheduling financial coaching sessions
5. Socio-emotional check-in and resource support

Virtual Spring 2020

To practice social distancing and ensure the safety and health of our participants and staff, Mujeres has decided to continue EDF's educational programming through a *Virtual Spring* Cohort that is scheduled to go through June 2020. Below is how each component will be delivered.

Groups

EDF team is planning to conduct virtual groups starting with the remaining weeks of the current cohort and into the Spring cohort. These last sessions will be supplemented with YouTube videos and remote coaching and support. This is in part because of the varying technology proficiency and access among EDF participants, as well as the wide range of concerns that budding entrepreneurs are facing in the light of the Stay-At-Home orders. YouTube was found to be the best fit for the supplemental support after it was determined to be accessible to most participants. Thus, the EDF team is planning on recording brief learning videos, highlighting key material. We will also pilot EDF Virtual Spring Cohort: Weekly virtual meetings following the EDF planned schedule for each session in Level 1 & Level 2.

EDF Network

EDF staff continues to engage clients in the social media group: Empresarias del Futuro Network. With an average of 5 posts per week, including: business resources, grant/loan/educational opportunities and small business development are regularly uploaded. EDF staff will also be creating info-graphs to assure key facts that small business entrepreneurs will need to navigate resources in this landscape.

Charlas Empresariales as a Webinar

One of the most recent additions to EDF has been our Charlas – Business Talks. Charlas have consisted of conversations with partners that have small business expertise. These professionals are knowledgeable about essential resources and Mujeres can bridge them to meet the needs of new and emerging entrepreneurs. EDF staff will continue these as they produce a Spanish webinar for Empresarias' community-at-large. Potential topics:

1. How to use social media for your businesses during the pandemic.
2. Resources for small businesses during this time of crisis (Currently, there is great info about small business support, but not necessarily in Spanish).
3. Online stores: Etsy, Grubhub, Uber Eats, etc.

4. Other: KIVA program in which Mujeres serves as a trustee, Referral Packet.

Once the “shelter in place” executive order is lifted, Mujeres leadership will consider possibilities on 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

Community Concerns and Challenges Facing the Empresarias Del Futuro Program

Most common concerns and challenges of our Empresarias are uncertainty about the survival and future of their business; reconsidering whether to begin a business or embark on a new business initiative; personal household finances and heightened anxiety about their own health and their families’. Furthermore, access and proficiency to technology (computer workstations, internet access, smart phones, data plans, etc.) vary widely within our participants. Technological considerations include: no access to a computer or internet and although the majority have a smartphone, they prefer WhatsApp to other communication platforms even texting.

Given these realities, our Empresarias have heightened interest in speaking with a personal financial coach and they understand more greatly the importance of their business’s digital presence to survive and succeed.

Participant Survey

It is vital that our Virtual Spring programming is data-informed and driven by what the participants need and are facing during the pandemic. We are developing and conducting surveys across the EDF community (including alumni and recent graduates) to gather information on how EDF staff can better support participants during this time. This survey will also gauge their technology access and proficiency more deeply.

Impact on Staff’s Work and Need to Increase Staff Capacity

Telework has led to an increase in prep work specifically for group sessions and individual coaching. EDF staff are constantly communicating via telephone with participants, bank partners and gathering and updating resources. As an organization committed to cultural competency and quality, we ask ourselves how best do we perform telework and virtual programs with a population that has limited access to technology? We’re still trying to figure that out and remain equally committed to finding solutions with the help of our funding and community partners.

Since day one of social distancing guidance was issued by the State of Illinois, Mujeres staff, and EDF personnel particularly, has begun to carry out the following measures:

- An increase in technology proficiency, comfort (practice), and equipment for staff. Mujeres has conducted an organization-wide staff feasibility telework survey to better assess what the technology lift will need to be.



- Support heightened proficiency with virtual platforms and remote work.
- Engagement in multiple small business webinars & trainings, needed in order to best support participants

Pending measures include:

- Kiva Training
- Formal training to better support and guide participants during the pandemic, including access to responsive grants, small grants, and/or loans for small business owners.
- 8x8, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp
- Employee Assistance / self-care in the new pandemic.
- Referral process – Illinois DCEO, Chicago funds/loans and private grants for small businesses.

Moreover, Mujeres hopes to meet participants' needs as best we can with referrals to service and compensation funds, particularly those who are vulnerable due to immigration status or as a gender-based violence survivor.

Domestic Violence's Impact on Empresarias

About 40% of our Empresarias are domestic violence survivors. The heightened stress caused by the pandemic is requiring that our EDF advocates provide socio-emotional support to participants. Our staff stays 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. We can only surmise that our Empresarias will be negatively impacted considering the reports of the growth of domestic violence calls to police and the hotline during the pandemic. As household incomes are reduced, immigrant families and women of color will be the most adversely affected. Intensified stress as a result of lost income, family illness and death may lead to domestic violence at many homes. Mujeres will be vigilant to any developments we observe among our Empresarias.

Vicarious Trauma

Providing educational support, counseling and advocacy for our Empresarias has always been satisfying, engaging, and emotionally taxing work for EDF program personnel. Many participants are undocumented immigrants and many others rely on their enterprise as their sole basis of income as well. Over the last three years, the toll on our EDF staff has increased due to the precarious situation that undocumented immigrants and mixed status families anxiously face under the Trump administration. Many of our staff members come from mixed status families too. 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 EDF personnel who will serve under even more challenging situations.