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## Memorandum

**To:** Our Funding Partners and Community Stakeholders  
**From:** Linda X. Tortolero, President & CEO  
**Subject:** Current Status of MLEA's Latina Leadership Program  
**Date:** May 14, 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* After the Governor's "Stay at Home" executive order came into effect, Mujeres all physical offices closed, effective March 21, 2020. We posted information on the front doors with our telephone number as well as Mujeres' main site phone number. Once the order is lifted, 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, Mujeres' staff began to work remotely, answering calls and connecting callers with resource and offering emotional support. Staff have downloaded the 8x8 phone application on their cellphones which forwards calls from our office phone system. This allows the staff to call participants or colleagues while personal phone numbers to stay private.

*Commitment to Leadership* Our Latina Leadership program is a key milestone in the healing journey of survivors. Many of the Latina women who are immigrants, don't understand systems of power and how to navigate them. The mastery of this skill has led to years of our Latina Leaders become involved in their children's schools, testifying before the legislature, participation of panels, site visits with supporters of Mujeres, and have spoken about community issues at local high schools, colleges and universities. But more than what plays out in public forums, Mujeres is committing to building up Latinas' **resiliency**. Personal development is vital to effective leadership. Our approach is to build (often rebuild) confidence by examining self-esteem. Our psycho-education training helps Latinas build healthy practices that inform ego-development and unlock inner leadership skills that inform self-determination.

*Service Impact* While our physical offices have closed, Mujeres strives to continue providing vital, culturally-competent support to help families heal and thrive. With our other programs this has meant outlining how each program component would be delivered via tele-working. Yet, for our Latina Leadership, it meant an assessment how the program can adapt to serve the community during this crisis. Mujeres wants support to our current and interested participants, as well as alumni of Latina

Leadership. This has led to a slight increase in restructuring and increase of internal collaboration with our Community Engagement & Mobilization Program. Here are key pivots we are making:

- *Case Management* Mujeres’ staff had noted the increase in anxiety and distress that our participants are confronting due to this public health and economic crisis. In addition to helping participants obtain essential supplies and financial aid (more on that below), staff have been prioritizing helping participants focus on their mental health.
- *Virtual Latina Leadership Trainings:* We’ve adapted our Latina Leadership curriculum so we can conduct trainings over Zoom, with follow-up support from our program staff via phone. This will allow for any interested survivors to enroll in our leadership development. These trainings will also be a vital channel for participants to learn about community health resources, as well as to advocate on issues that impact vulnerable families.
- *Tightening the Safety Net for our Community* Our Latina Leadership participants, incoming participants as well as alumni of the program, will be invited to our advocacy efforts to expand the safety net for immigrant communities. Mujeres understand that Latina hourly-wage “essential” workers who are still putting their health on the line need our support. The restaurant and hospitality industries are collapsing, and very little thought or recovery plans focus on the immigrant labor that has helped these industries thrive.
- *Increase Leadership development in our telework.* With our Community Engagement and Mobilization team, the Latina Leadership Program will host leadership development trainings through Zoom on advocacy, public speaking, and Mujeres’ COVID Response Platform to engage and mobilize leaders. This will likely lead to an increase of participation in virtual town halls and community forums by our Latina Leaders.
- *Build on the momentum of Community Leaders* The silver lining of having this pause has allowed us to better assess the long-term capacity building of the program. We will engage our bigger list of supporters on calls to action, engaging leaders who have been previously engaged, but more recently less active, as well as training and engaging with participants from other programs of the organization, such as the Empresarias del Futuro program who have expressed interest in organizing around issues of economic security for immigrants.
- *Understanding Leadership development in the face of a Pandemic* The survivors who enroll in our Latina Leadership program, represent the most vulnerable. Latinos have surpassed all other racial and ethnic groups in confirmed COVID cases in Illinois, yet many lack health insurance, paid leave, or paid sick time. The southwest side of Chicago (such as Brighton Park, West Lawn, and Little Village) and the Latino suburbs of West Suburban Cook County have been hit particularly hard. A needs assessment done of our clients, found that 63% have had their employment negatively impacted, more than 56% do not qualify for unemployment insurance, 37% said they were most concerned about how to pay rent.

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.

**Support During COVID19:** The stress of the pandemic is requiring that our staff provide emotional support to parents as well as provide information about crucial resources available to the community, such as food, medicine, hygiene and sanitation supplies. *The demand for support to cover our community's basic human needs is immense.* Mujeres was fortunate to receive first round grant funding (\$25,000) for cash assistance with the Chicago Community Coronavirus Responsiveness Fund. This funding has already been distributed and we hope to secure another grant soon. Mujeres has quickly seized on any other opportunities to provide cash assistance or gift cards for our families many of whom are undocumented and highly vulnerable for multiple reasons. We also have received funds (\$25,000) from the Illinois Immigrant Funders Collaborative to support suburban, undocumented individuals and families. Mujeres will be looking to support increased communications capacity to assure the most vulnerable in our community know and understand the resources and referrals we can provide in this crucial time.

*Vicarious Trauma 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 personnel. Survivors have reported an increase in feeling isolated, without their normal support systems, leaving them vulnerable to depression and other mental health struggles. The stress this pandemic is likely to increase the challenges our staff face as they work help survivors find healing.