



Pilsen HQ
2124 W. 21st Place
Chicago, IL 60608
773.890.7676

Brighton Park
4700 S. California Ave
Chicago IL 60632
773.890.8620

West Suburban Office
7222 W. Cermak Road. 509
North Riverside, IL 60546
708.442.1299

Memorandum

To: Our Funding Partners and Community Stakeholders
From: Linda X. Tortolero, President & CEO
Subject: Current Status of MLEA's Sexual Assault Program
Date: April 23, 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 survivors.

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

Office Closures

Until Friday, March 20th, Mujeres' Sexual Assault 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. Program participants of the sexual assault 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 SA 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' main site phone number. 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

After the Governor's "Stay at Home" order, all SA Program staff began to work remotely. Mujeres' 42-hour SA trained team, including the receptionists, answer calls and connect callers with staff during office hours. SA staff have downloaded the 8x8 phone application on their cellphones which forwards calls from our office phone system. It also allows the SA 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. SA 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 sexual assault. 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: In person presentations suspended. Our Community Educator is currently working on professional development, receiving professional training, and creating new prevention content. Some presentations have been done online and staff will move forward with providing similar presentations.
- Medical Advocacy. In person response is currently suspended. In addition to SA staff, active volunteers and interns are assisting survivors via telephone. Crisis intervention support is provided, and hospitals provide advocacy packets that had previously been supplied by Mujeres to ER staff.
- Crisis Intervention for those who contact the office during 9-5PM, the SA 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 work on special research and projects and actively sign up for medical advocacy shifts as well.
- Court advocacy – Our court advocates are counseling survivors over the phone. At the same time, court advocates are helping survivors to complete the Civil No Contact Orders Act (CNCO) 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 SA survivors in pursuit of their legal rights.

The stress of the pandemic is requiring that our SA counselors provide emotional support to survivors of SA 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 \$25,000 from the Illinois Immigration Funder 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.

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 SA survivors has always been satisfying yet emotionally taxing work for sexual assault program personnel. Over the last three years, the toll on our SA 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 SA 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.