



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 Supervised Visitation/Safe Exchange Program Offering
Date: April 28, 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.

Prior to the Stay-at-Home Orders, The Supervised Visitation/Safe Exchange Program Offering at Mujeres:

- Supervised Visitation offers court-ordered supervised visits for visiting parents and their children. Visits are opportunities for parents and children to develop bonds in a monitored, safe, and healing environment.
- Safe Exchanges are also court-ordered and ensure that children can safely be exchanged between the residential and visiting parents and that all parties feel safe. All interactions are closely observed. and safety is prioritized.

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. Brighton Park's satellite office houses our Supervised Visitation/Safe Exchange Program, which meant an immediate halt to our SVSE program. Our staff immediately informed families and have stayed in contact ever since. 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 program staff was also listed.

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, all SVSE Program staff began to work remotely, answer calls and connecting callers with resource and offering emotional support. All staff have downloaded the 8x8 phone application on their cellphones which forwards calls from our office phone system. It also allows the staff to call participants or colleagues from our office phone system. This allows all personal phone numbers to stay private.

Service Impact

Mujeres' SVSE has allowed children to maintain a relationship with the visiting parent and gives families a turning point. While our physical offices have closed, Mujeres has strived to continue providing our vital, culturally-competent support to help families heal and thrive. With the guidance from DCSF, conversations with other visitation centers, and our deep understanding of our communities, Inspire for Action's technical assistance and trainings, Mujeres has adjusted the program components. Below are the pivots that have been made:

Supervised Visitation: The following steps have all come together from attending Mujeres Latinas en Acción's SVSE staff has created this working plan to help us structure the implementation of supervised phone calls due to the shelter-in-place orders in response to COVID-19.

- *Safety is Paramore.* Mujeres SVSE staff will strive for safety and civility for all parties involved, providing orientation before there custodial parent, the visiting parent and child(ren).
- *Eligibility.* Decisions about which families can participate in these televisit calls will be made case by case. Currently these tele-visitations are offered to with clients that are considered "lower risk." At this time there will be no new intakes of families not enrolled with Mujeres' SVSE program. No one will be obligated to participate. Schedules will be determined by supervisor per case and next scheduled call will depend on experience with previous one.
- *Call Durations* Average calls are 10-25 minutes, depending on how many children, and child's age. Supervisor will navigate it case by case. Supervisors will be using 8X8 app to conduct the 3-way call. We will call the visiting parent first to ensure they are available and then hang up to call the residential parent and make sure the child is available and residential parent answers. Once the child is ready on the phonline, the visiting parent will be connected to the call.
- *Agreements from Parents.* Both parents are check-ed in with the routinely. Staff will remind clients that record phone calls or video calls is illegal, and that those recordings are not permissible in court. There is a possibility of not being able to phone calls with those younger children who are not vocal. For these cases, we will work with custodial parent on other forms of communication such photographs or videos than can be transferred by our staff.
- *Follow-up calls.* Staff will be making follow up calls with all clients after each supervised to call to make sure everyone is comfortable and feels safe and supported.

Safe Exchanges: Suspended. Due to our physical locations closed to adhere to the stay-at-home orders, there is at this time we've informed all parents of this explaining that we are here for support should they have any pressing needs.



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 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.

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.