



INTERSECTING BARRIERS:

Challenges to Economic Empowerment for Domestic Violence Survivors

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

While domestic violence affects thousands of Chicagoans every year, there is often limited focus on the impact of economic insecurity on survivors, and little research on their economic and employment needs. This report seeks to better understand the barriers to economic independence for survivors of domestic violence, and more specifically, to living wage jobs by gathering the insights and experiences of survivors, domestic violence advocates, and workforce development professionals.

This report draws on an exploratory, mixed-methods study conducted in the Chicagoland area in the fall of 2021, utilizing data from online surveys, focus groups, and interviews with participants from three constituencies: domestic violence survivors (49 survey respondents, 5 interviews), domestic violence advocates (87 survey respondents, 28 in focus groups, from 9 different organizations), and workforce development professionals (35 survey respondents, 15 in focus groups, from 14 different organizations). WE recruited participants through networks of domestic violence providers, workforce development organizations, and social media, providing stipends for participation.

Key Takeaways:



An overarching takeaway from this study was **how intersecting the various economic and employment needs are for domestic violence survivors**: from basic income, housing, and transportation to safety and child care, these needs were magnified by the ongoing economic and psychological effects of trauma. It is notable that similar issues were identified as barriers to economic empowerment for survivors whether they are employed, unemployed, or attending school or job training programs. The issue cannot be oversimplified to a lack of financial literacy when many of these survivors' needs are unmet because of the challenges of current economic and social safety net systems. These systems make it difficult for survivors to make ends meet, from the lack of quality jobs with living wages to bureaucratic hurdles in receiving social services.



Many survivors are focused on immediate, fundamental needs such as safety and having a roof over their heads, and the accumulation of unmet needs makes it difficult to find work or access social services. Housing and transportation are huge challenges for survivors who are often left with no finances, legal documents, or permanent housing upon leaving their abusive situation. These challenges are magnified by the ongoing mental health issues caused by the trauma of abuse which leaves them overwhelmed and exhausted. Without these basic needs met, survivors do not have the resources or mental space to successfully apply for most jobs (or even job training). Given the diversity of the Chicagoland area, issues facing survivors who are immigrants (and particularly those who are undocumented) were frequently raised, including language access, documentation, eligibility for work and social services, and on-the-job harassment.



Consistently throughout the study, access to affordable, safe, and convenient child care arose as an urgent need for survivors. While important for employed survivors, child care was an even greater challenge for those in school or job training programs. There seems to be a particular need for part-time and/or extended-hours care due to irregular work hours, court dates, recovery from abuse incidents, post-secondary education, and job interviews. There is also an emphasis on safety given the fraught nature of divorce proceedings or custody battles with an abuser.



There is great need for flexible schedules, mental health support, and trauma-informed workplaces, but those supports are often not available for survivors, including those in school or job training programs. Thus, some of the programs, jobs, and services which would most benefit survivors on their path to economic empowerment are often not understanding, accommodating, or flexible enough to facilitate access or success. There was also significant shame, stigma, and fear among survivors who did not want to disclose their domestic violence situation at work even if it gave them access to additional support and resources.



Despite how much support and help survivors expressed they received from domestic violence organizations, they also named limitations and gaps in the systems they sought support from. Focus groups frequently named significant holes in the social safety net outside of the services received from domestic violence organizations, a safety net that has been even more frayed during the pandemic. They also revealed the challenges for domestic violence (DV) advocates and workforce development (WFD) professionals in serving a diverse population with varying needs, and identified gaps in their knowledge to serve survivors more effectively. WFD professionals recognized their lack of training and information on domestic violence, while DV providers were uncertain about who and where to refer survivors for their workforce needs. DV and WFD service providers were unable to identify examples of sustained, effective partnerships, despite a desire to be connected to additional referral networks both for professional development and resources to help survivors.

Given the intersecting barriers we identified through our research, it is clear that solutions must also be holistic and complementary in nature. Employers, advocates, philanthropic organizations, and government systems all can play a part in better supporting the economic—and more specifically, employment-needs—of domestic violence survivors as they seek to become financially independent. Policies and practices need to be addressed at the public policy, systems, and program practices levels to address the multiple challenges identified in this report. In particular, there is a need for more effective and meaningful working relationships between domestic violence and workforce development organizations to better meet the diverse needs of survivors and advocate on their behalf, whether through partnerships, coalitions, or larger community networks.