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## **Transitional Housing for Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence: A 2014-15 Snapshot**

### **Broadside #1: Snapshot of Provider Approaches to Employment-Related Assistance**

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#### **Submitted to:**

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## ***Broadside #1: Snapshot of Provider Approaches to Employment-Related Assistance***

The providers we interviewed run the gamut, in terms of the way they think about their participants' potential for gainful employment, the kind of employment-related services they offer, and the kinds of community partnerships they have formed. The following excerpts from our interviews provide a sense of that range of approaches.

***Inclusion of a comment does not imply endorsement by the authors or OVW of a provider's approach.***

(#01) Our participants have a wide range of backgrounds: some of our women lack work skills and experience, some are former migrant workers, and some are women of means, because our program is located in a wealthy community. Our Women of Means program outreaches to wealthy DV victims afraid to come out with their situation. We've had two referrals from that program to transitional housing, and they've had different challenges. They've had wealthy lifestyles and are qualified for postgraduate careers, but struggle to overcome lack of confidence, emotional barriers, and sometimes legal issues.

With someone who's unexperienced in work or doesn't have many skills, we do an assessment to help guide the development of an individual service plan. The assessment helps identify their capabilities, their preferences, and what kind of employment will suit their lifestyle -- typically being a parent with no help -- so we need to help them find a job that will fit that kind of schedule. We do the assessment, then we do a job search with them, show them how to interview, dress, and provide basic job readiness support.

Our migrant workers are accustomed to discrimination in their workplace and being asked discriminatory and illegal questions, so educating them about their rights is important, so they feel more confident and empowered.

We teach some computer skills individually, but if they need more help we send them to a class.

We have a relationship with the local Goodwill Industries career center, so sometimes we'll refer clients there if they want to work with someone on resumes or job searches. I can do that kind of work with them, or we can refer them. We also do referrals to the local vocational school for education -- primarily English and computer classes, certifications, nursing programs, etc.

If participants don't have a cell phone, we provide them with one as part of their economic plan. Our transitional housing cottages are set up with computers. If the kids are in school, the families can receive internet for \$10 a month so we direct them towards that. Our houses can all receive internet; we used to provide it for a reduced cost but it was more expensive than the county program, so now, if they want it, they get it on their own, which is more empowering.

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(#02) When we re-applied for this grant, we concentrated on education. There are a lot of clients who can't make it on a low-wage job and raise their children without child support. They want to go back to school and get an education. We are focused on helping our clients get that education to help them obtain more sustainable employment. We have a lot of industries in our area -- automotive plants, clothing factories, food factories -- but our clients need the job skills to get into the local industries. Once they get those jobs, they will have the benefits of job security, insurance, and even retirement that many of them have never considered before.

We're working on a non-traditional employment opportunity in partnership with local community colleges to get women into their programs, which can lead them into non-traditional fields of employment. We believe that even if they can't work now, it's important for them to get an education because someday they may be able to work

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(#03) Clients have a challenge finding jobs that pay enough. So many jobs pay \$10 /hour or less, which is not enough for the cost of living. We refer clients with limited education or work skills to the local workforce development program for help with developing vocational skills, resume writing, and job placement. We also encourage participants in our program to consider attending a vocational program at our community college or to get their GED, if they never graduated high school. We encourage them to use this time, while they are getting rental assistance and don't have to work full time to pay the bills, to put themselves in a better position to get a full time job that pays better than McDonalds. We focus on making education or getting a vocational skill one of their goals. We encourage them to think about their long-term goals and career plan.

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(#04) We partner with a career center that's been able to help participants find jobs – sometimes it's bonded employment that they need, and the career center has been able to help with that. Most of our local jobs are seasonal, so that's a challenge, unless they go back to school, or do one of these courses through the career center that can lead to a better job. They have more jobs available if they have more training.

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(#05) We work with clients to clarify their employment goals, and figure out if they want to participate in a vocational program or get their GED or attend ESL classes; and if so, we help them enroll in those classes or get their training certificates. If they're ready to look for work, we help them understand how to do it. We often do resume building and interviewing workshops, to help them build their skills for seeking employment. We don't do any employment placement, but can refer them to agencies, if that's what they're looking for.

We don't want to take the place of agencies like the career centers; our role is to support their employment goals by making referrals; but through our OVW grant, we can also pay for their classes or a job training program a participant wants to attend. We can also help pay for their books and school supplies, because part of helping them become self-sufficient is helping them get the job skills they need to obtain employment.

We have an MOU with a nearby vocational training school, and they provide counseling about what classes to take, depending on the particular career a participant wants to pursue. The school staff act as academic and job counselors for our clients, and they're our MOU partner with our OVW grant.

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(#06) Over time, we have done surveys and focus groups with people who left the program; the last time we did this study, we realized that although the women that left the program were no longer with the abuser and were in permanent housing -- which were two key goals -- and although they were working, they were living at a poverty level. We were able to get a grant to hire an advocate who works with the women on budgeting, savings, household management, and financial literacy. But we also wanted to help our participants earn more money, so we thought about helping the women have their own businesses, because that's quick and can begin to happen while they're in the program, and maybe they can make a lot of money.

So we partnered with another nonprofit that taught people how to have their own business, and we did several workshops throughout the three years that we had the grant. Some of the women decided they were going to have their own business, but a lot of people struggled with the idea of not having the security of the paycheck, and they were thinking, "I may have to go back to school if I really want to do this or that."

So we thought about the trades, which requires them to expand or change their belief system, so for this grant, we have contracted with that nonprofit, and they realized, "I can make this much an hour, and I can make that right away when I start going to school," so that's what we're working on. We also decided that we needed to have a career center right here so that they could just come downstairs and work on a resume, check their email, etc., so we created a career center on site, so that they can access a computer, and if they have computers, access the Internet. Sometimes, they don't know how to apply for scholarships online, so we can help with that.

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(#07) We don't have a formal employment program, but we assist individual participants with their job searches or with resume creation or with practicing how you might answer certain questions in an interview. We refer quite a bit. I feel like that need is pretty well met in our community; there are three or four programs within 15 or 20 miles of our program that do that.

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(#08) Our employment advocate does a series of five workshops using a curriculum developed by NNEDV and [Wider Opportunities for Women](#), and just like the economic empowerment curriculum, they did a really good job blending the worlds of domestic violence and employment. A traditional online curriculum might show you how to do a job search; this curriculum shows women how to safely do a job search. So whether you're in a shelter, out in the community, are you communicating safely?

Our employment advocate also meets individually with anybody we refer to her, from any of our residential or non-residential programs, and she does everything from resume building to coaching on interviewing to looking for leads for people. She does a phenomenal job. She also spends a lot of time building relationships with employers; she goes to job fairs, she taps our board members, some of whom work at major companies, and she uses her own contacts with employers. She makes a pitch about how we could partner together, and how their company could employ some of the women receiving services in our agency. She provides some domestic violence education and talks about how maybe they could look at some of our clients through a different lens, and overlook some of the barriers that might prevent them from opening the door for women we are trying to get hired.

For example, a couple of months ago she brought in a casino that's pretty close to here and right on a bus line -- transportation access is one thing we always look for -- and we talked about all the different entry level and mid-level positions; we serve women with the full spectrum of work experience -- people with absolutely no work history or an awful work history, to people who are actually doing pretty well, but want to do something different. She brought the HR people from the casino in, our participants came, and the casino HR reps talked about what they look for in an employee, and what they need. Our participants had already worked with the employment advocate on interviewing, and from this event, seven survivors were hired; and of those seven survivors, five were still there after three months.

Our employment advocate also works with participants on job retention. She works with the people that she helped place in jobs, and stays in touch with the employer, and she also works with participants who are currently working to help them not lose their job. If we can help someone keep their job, we can work on safety planning from a more stable base of housing, and hopefully help them avoid returning to shelter.

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(#09) We've had many that were able to find employment, but not to maintain it -- for varying reasons, including childcare, transportation. But often just because they're not ready, or -- I don't want to say work ethic -- but there is a piece of that, too, that they haven't had steady employment in their lifetime, so they don't quite grasp that you can't just not show up, or call in absent all the time.

Although we don't provide any formal type of employment assistance, we do help them get to the employment office here in town, or to our local college where we have programs for dislocated workers and displaced homemakers. We have an arrangement with that college for them to go there to be tested or to get some kind of training options. But if you've never been on a college campus, it's very intimidating and scary. I think those few who have taken advantage of that program, we've given them a ride and sat with them through the testing. It's hard for them to feel comfortable there, after they've been told over and over again in their abusive relationship that they're not smart enough to go to school, or to learn any type of substantial employment; it's a big barrier to overcome.

There are places – mostly fast food type places -- that other participants are working at and they might say that, “I know someone else who needs a job.” So, word-of-mouth.

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(#10) We have a thrift store, which serves as the home of our education and job training program. The nine-week eight hours/week program provides participants with an opportunity to earn some money, learn the skills they'll need to work in retail, get help with their resume, and get coaching for interviewing. The thrift store has been a tremendous resource for our program. In addition to supporting our job training efforts, its sales have helped to fund our programs, and thrift store donations provide shelter and transitional program participants with thousands of dollars' worth of donated clothing and household furnishings for their transitional and permanent housing.

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(#11) We work hard with all our women to find them jobs, and we've been very successful. We have an in-house job training program. If a woman comes here and hasn't been working for a while or needs to hone her skills, we hire her to work in the office. During her time working in the office, she's not only acquiring skills, but we're helping her every day to look for jobs – work on her résumé. We've got a great success rate in helping women find jobs.

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(#12) There's a local chapter of the [Sorooptimist Club](#), a women's social and economic empowerment organization that's kind of like the Rotary Club, but it's all women. And they offer an annual scholarship. It's not exclusively for domestic violence survivors, but it's often been awarded to a DV survivor, I'd say three years out of five. It's awarded to women who've overcome adversity, are the primary wage-earner in the family, and are working to improve their education. So as a practical matter, in a community our size, a lot of the applications that they get are coming from folks who have had some involvement with our agency.

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(#13) We try to connect participants with job training or work with them on scholarships for education, depending on what their goals are, and what it will take to get there. We've had some success in working with the [Sunshine Lady Foundation](#) to get scholarships for some of our participants. In turn, our housing partner will allow those families to stay in their apartment, because they still qualify as low income. The Sunshine Ladies Foundation will give them money for tuition and rent and some supplies, and if they are working part-time while going to school, then when they are done with our transitional housing program, they may be able to stay in the apartment.

For job placement and education we work with Goodwill's job training program; they come to our program to assist clients on a weekly basis with job readiness, resume development, and interview practice. They also help with identifying job opportunities, and can leverage their connections with employers in the area. And they provide ongoing support for our clients. Our residents have had tremendous success, both in our transitional housing program and in our shelter program, in finding employment through Goodwill, thanks to the support that they provide. They are one of our transitional housing program grant partners.

Credit problems, eviction histories, and criminal justice involvement are all obstacles to employment, just as they are to housing. That's another reason why we work so closely with Goodwill -- because they have such a strong employment network, and can talk an employer into giving our participants a chance. Our participants have been through training, and we really believe they can be successful, but their strengths can be overshadowed by their record. I can't say enough about the importance of those connections and the networking.

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(#14) We have two small coffee shops; they're part of our non-profit. We just opened our second one and we use it as a job training program, and we've developed a 3-4 month curriculum around it. We don't only show women how to make coffee, we have open mic live music, and if the women like making crafts and jewelry,

they can sell their products at the coffee shop as well. The women learn how to run a coffee shop and how to start their own business. For every woman who's living in our house that's working at the coffee shop, there's a community member with some area of expertise, whether it's writing a business plan or developing a resume or job coaching. We make sure the women are mentored by multiple people to help them succeed. The goal for them is to become trained while they're at our shop, and then we focus on "what transferable skills can you apply to getting another job," so we can move them out and put new women into the training.

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(#15) We are in a community where poverty is just a huge issue. The biggest barrier for our program is that many of these women stay in crisis for extended periods of time. We may get them stabilized in an apartment with employment and then their hours are cut back, or they lose their jobs, and then they're back in crisis. This is something that we experience quite a bit, because of the educational level of many of the survivors. These are women that don't have a lot of education. Even though we offer help with GED and employment opportunities, and we try to enhance the types of jobs they can get, and help them get more stable jobs, often they have to end up in a service-related job, which is just not that stable.

Many of them would like to extend their education, and work on their GED, and improve their educational levels, but if they have to make a decision between working and education, they've got to have a job. So it's very difficult for them to commit to getting the GED, which requires a significant commitment of time.

I would say the average grade level of many of the survivors we serve is third or fourth grade; what people don't understand is that getting the GED can actually be more difficult than if you've got a high school diploma. So what we focus on is trying to increase their reading competency and literacy and work on the life skills that will lead to a direct improvement in terms of basic budgeting and understanding of money.

The low education levels are the result of the intersection of a number of factors: trauma, lifetime childhood trauma, domestic violence, and poverty. These are middle-aged women who were failed by our school system -- undiagnosed and unidentified -- and are now coming into our system. Obviously these are the women who are going to be most vulnerable to adulthood violence because their options are so limited and because of whom they're connected to.

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(#16) The YWCA is a great example of what building jobs into your model might look like. They're a huge facility and they have a large population base that they're drawing from and several facilities. They quit hiring people who were in charge of their facilities, for instance, or they'd hire one person, and then they'd make those jobs available to women who wanted them, but the person that they hired to be in charge of it is a facilities manager, so part of what that person was hired to do was not only pay women to help keep the facilities up but to teach them concrete skills, for example, how to be an apartment manager. Or how they could become in charge of a janitorial services. There are some big franchises here that do corporate and industrial janitorial work, and they were paying women to learn those skills on-the-job, and then the women could put the experience on their resume. So for a year and a half of the time they were in transitional housing, they were gainfully employed, they've got a built-in reference and a job record they can use; they were getting paid and they were gaining skills.

The YWCA also provides a lot of childcare; they were teaching the women how to provide childcare. Some of them were providing transportation, so the YWCA was paying for them to study and apply for their chauffeur's license. Some of them were learning by doing the support staff work, learning how to be an administrative assistant in an office.

It was really an interesting model and they had some tremendous successes with it, and it really also promoted engagement because the women were in their buildings with other people a lot, and it was an excellent example of having women right there on the facilities actively engaged and meeting people and involved, rather than being at some random worksite.