

# **Needs Assessment Report**

## **The Equal Access to Safety Initiative**

### **Hampden County, Massachusetts**

#### **Executive Summary**

In order to effectively meet the needs of people with disabilities and Deaf people who have experienced domestic violence and/or sexual assault the Equal Access to Safety Initiative conducted a needs assessment. This document is an overview of the goals, process, information gathered, key findings, and conclusions.

#### **Background**

The Equal Access to Safety Initiative is a collaboration between Goodwill of the Pioneer Valley (Goodwill) and the YWCA of Western Massachusetts (YWCA). The Initiative is funded by a three year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women to enhance services for people with disabilities and Deaf people in Hampden County, Massachusetts, who have experienced domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

The Initiative Team met for a number of months to build an effective, mutually beneficial collaboration. As a part of the planning process significant time was spent on developing understanding of shared mission, vision, goals, values, and assumptions. The second step in the planning process was the development of a Needs Assessment Plan. The purpose of the needs assessment has been to gather practical information from program participants, staff, and board members from the two agencies to inform the Initiative Team of strengths and areas in need of improvement at Goodwill and the YWCA. The Needs Assessment Plan was reviewed and approved by the funder.

The information gathered in the needs assessment will be used to develop a Strategic Plan with manageable and achievable goals in keeping with our Initiative goals. The focus of the Initiative is on the YWCA and Goodwill. It is on organizational change within the two organizations and on the relationship between the two organizations.

## **Needs Assessment Goals**

Each organization in the Initiative has a long-standing commitment to a participant-centered approach to service delivery, and to policies and procedures that focus on the needs of participants. Both organizations are committed to providing appropriate, responsive, safe, accessible, quality service, including embracing new approaches to service delivery and systems change. Both organizations are committed to respecting differences, including but not limited to language, race, gender, religion, age, ethnicity, sexual identity, socio-economic status, abilities, and disabilities. This includes treating participants, colleagues, and others with respect and acceptance. In working toward our goals for the Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan, and Implementation following the Strategic Plan, these commitments will always be kept in the forefront.

### **Goal 1:**

Identify programmatic and physical barriers to receiving timely, appropriate, quality services at each agency, as well as strategies that support and facilitate access and increase responsiveness.

### **Goal 2:**

Identify cultures and attitudes of each organization that support or limit a welcoming, accessible, safe, and supportive environment for survivors with disabilities.

### **Goal 3:**

Identify the existing policies, procedures, and practices - strengths and areas in need of improvement - and those that are missing at each organization to provide timely, appropriate quality services.

### **Goal 4:**

Identify knowledge and attitudes at:

- Goodwill related to domestic violence and sexual assault;
- YWCA related to disability, Deaf culture, and accessibility;
- Both agencies related to the intersection of these issues.

### **Goal 5:**

Identify how the YWCA and Goodwill can work together most effectively to serve survivors with disabilities within the context of the greater social service system in Hampden County, Massachusetts.

## **Needs Assessment Process**

The Equal Access to Safety Initiative used three methods for gathering information from YWCA and Goodwill staff and program participants: focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Recruitment was done by trained agency staff recruiters who hand delivered letters of invitation and RSVP forms. All questions asked were designed and approved by the

Initiative Team and received prior approval from the funder. Safety considerations, access considerations, confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and the consent process were all addressed in recruiting people to participate in the process and during the information gathering.

Through the focus groups and interviews we spoke directly to 157 people: 99 program participants and 58 agency staff. Survey responses were received from 68 staff and board members combined.

## **Needs Assessment Key Findings**

Through a Needs Assessment the Equal Access to Safety Initiative identified six key findings.

It should be noted that there is some overlap between findings.

### **1. Policies/ Procedures/ Intake/ Mandated Reporting**

There is a need for clearer policies and procedures to better meet the needs of survivors with disabilities and Deaf people and to increase application of those that currently exist. We need to aid staff in using the mandated reporting requirements to support survivors with disabilities and Deaf people. We need to refine our intake procedures to more fully understand the needs of survivors with disabilities and Deaf people.

### **2. Accessibility/Barriers**

We found that there are areas for improvement in both agencies in accessibility of services to support full participation for survivors with disabilities and Deaf people. Barriers to access include physical, environmental, communication, attitudinal, and programmatic in varying degrees in different programs within each agency.

### **3. Welcoming/Safe**

We found that survivors were able to disclose violence or abuse in their lives if they felt safe and welcome at the agencies which includes being respected, listened to, acknowledged, and allowed to proceed at their own pace without judgment. Generally, program participants feel safe at both agencies. Generally, program participants feel welcome at both agencies, with some variability in specific programs.

### **4. Confidentiality**

Balancing privacy and confidentiality to the satisfaction of program participants, staff, funders and legal entities is always a challenge. Both agencies would benefit from ongoing dialogue on how to maintain this balance and how to communicate these challenges to program participants and staff.

### **5. Knowledge/Training/Awareness**

We found a lack of knowledge and awareness at both agencies on: abuse; disabilities; risk-assessment; accommodations; mandated reporting; communication skills; confidentiality;

policies and procedure; participant intimacy; sexual harassment prevention in the workplace; as well as the programs and services offered by the other agency in addition to their own. Additionally, there is a need for opportunities for experiential learning. All should be incorporated into orientation and offered on an ongoing basis.

## **6. Other**

Staff managers, staff leaders, and board members at both agencies expressed strong support for the Initiative goals but are realistic as to the challenges of implementing organizational change.

## **Conclusions**

Through the needs assessment process we have identified strengths and areas in need of improvement. The information gathered in the needs assessment will be used to develop a strategic plan with manageable and achievable goals in keeping with our Initiative goals. Staff and board members involved in the process expressed a continued committed to providing appropriate, responsive, safe, accessible, quality service, including embracing new approaches to service delivery and systems change. All understand that there will be challenges.

Initiative Team members have demonstrated a high degree of investment of time. From the beginning they have spent considerable time thinking about the Initiative. They have worked hard to analyze the information that has been identified as a result of the needs assessment and to think about how to utilize the information. The two agencies had not worked together prior to the Initiative. A strong partnership has developed and has already born fruit. As a result of the trust that has developed between members of the Team program participants from each organization have directly benefited from the expertise of the other organization. We have an excellent foundation for our work together.