

The Women's Fund

520 Columbia Drive, Suite 100

Johnson City, NY 13790

Phone (607) 772-6773

donorswhocare.org



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Women's Fund Cancels 2020 Breakfast

Among the many disappointments to arise from COVID-19 this year was the need to cancel the Women's Fund's 16th Annual Breakfast, scheduled for June 25.

The good news is that our keynote speaker, legal journalist Jami Floyd, has kindly agreed to speak at the breakfast in 2021. Look out in the spring for information on that event, scheduled for June 24 at the Doubletree by Hilton in Binghamton.

Domestic Violence Services Adjust to the COVID Era

Along with killing tens of thousands of people in the US and putting millions out of work, COVID-19 has created another serious concern, especially for women—an increase in domestic violence. New York State's domestic violence hot line received 30 percent more calls in April 2020 than in April 2019, according to the New York State Office for Prevention of Domestic Violence.

It makes sense that the pandemic would trigger more domestic violence. While worries about health and money have dialed up stress in households, shelter-at-home orders have also trapped many victims in close quarters with their abusers.

For organizations that address domestic violence, those pressures don't always translate into more requests for help. But that doesn't mean our region is exempt from heightened risk.

Take Rise-NY, the Endicott-based organization formerly known as the SOS Shelter. "In April, May and June 2020, we experienced a 72 percent decrease in bed nights at the shelter compared to the same time period in 2019," says Rise's executive director, Nicole Barren.

But that's not necessarily a good trend, Barren adds, citing a study in New York City that examined why victims weren't asking for help this spring. "People were



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scared because they were risking infection for COVID if they went into a residential facility," she says. Some mistakenly assumed that domestic violence services were closed during the shutdown. Also, people at home with their abusers had little chance to reach out for help.

At Opportunities for Otsego (OFO), calls to the domestic violence hot line have stayed at about their usual levels. But as New York state reopened, more of those calls started to come from victims, rather than concerned friends or neighbors.

"We surmise that more victims are calling the hot line because batterers have been called back to work. When they're out of

the house, the victim would feel safer to call," says Dan Maskin, chief executive officer (CEO) at OFO, which operates a shelter and provides services to victims of violent crimes, including domestic violence.

Filings for orders of protection have increased during the pandemic, Maskin says. OFO staff use video platforms to conduct that business and provide advocacy and counseling, rather than meet with clients in person. "It's actually alleviated problems for some of the victims we serve, because they don't have to deal with transportation or arrange for child care," he says.

Survivors of domestic violence

continued on back

A Group of Her Own

For people in recovery from substance use disorders, our region offers a wealth of support groups. Most of those groups, however, accept both men and women. And for many women, that mixture doesn't work, says Alexis Pleus, executive director at TruthPharm, a Binghamton-based advocacy, education and support services organization focused on substance use disorders.

"A lot of young women report feeling targeted and preyed upon," says Pleus. Also, many women in active addiction or recovery have suffered sexual-related trauma, which becomes closely tied to their addiction issues, she says. "At a co-ed meeting, it's impossible for them to talk about those situations."

These obstacles often keep women from seeking out any sort of group support at all.

"We don't like the idea that they're suffering alone," Pleus says. "We sure don't like the idea that a lot of women who have been exposed to sexual-related trauma go to these groups and, one, feel they can't share about the trauma, and two, they're almost retraumatized by having people ask them out on dates. That's not what they're there for."



A \$4,500 grant from the Women's Fund will help TruthPharm develop a new group where women can feel safe while working toward recovery.

The group will include six to 12 women, overseen by a social worker but led by two women who have also worked to overcome addiction. This peer-led format is designed to make women in the group feel that everyone is on the same level. "It's been shown that in peer-led groups, people share more about their personal experiences," Pleus says. The social worker will step in if the discussion enters territory that is too difficult for the peer leaders to negotiate.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains to be seen whether the group will meet in person, with social distancing protocols in place, or members will get together on Zoom, Pleus says.

Whichever way it goes, the group could provide a better option for women who might not otherwise seek help. "Support groups are seen to improve a person's chance of recovery by about 50 percent," Pleus says. "We're hoping this improves the recovery success rate for women in the area."

Domestic Violence Services *continued from front*

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who get therapeutic counseling from Rise gained a similar benefit when Rise moved that service to the phone. Now that New York State has largely reopened, Rise once again offers in-person counseling. But phone sessions remain available for clients who prefer them, Barren says.

COVID has also forced both organizations to make changes in their residential services.

When New York shut down in mid-March, OFO's domestic violence shelter closed for three weeks so staff could figure out how

to operate safely. "We got loaded up with personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies," Maskin says. "We have a Plexiglas arrangement in the offices and set up rules about common areas." Residents from different households stay masked when they're together, and no more than one person at a time can use the kitchen.

Rise also has added new safety protocols, including a lower limit on how many residents its shelter can accommodate at once. But the shelter has almost never reached that limit.

A person living in a dangerous situation should not let the pandemic deter them from asking for help, Barren says. "Don't be afraid if you do have to come into a residential facility. There are a lot of things in place to prevent COVID transmission."

Women's Fund 2020 Grants

DCMO BOCES \$4,568 for scholarships for women to participate in an entrepreneurship program (*Chenango/Delaware*)

Family Planning of SCNY \$8,000 to support their Access to Women's Healthcare program (*multiple counties*)

Mothers and Babies Perinatal Network \$5,000 for the PEAS (Perinatal Education and Support for Women in Recovery) program (*Broome*)

TruthPharm \$4,500 for the Women's Motivational Interviewing Support Group (*Broome*)

VoteRunLead \$7,500 for a leadership development program to encourage women to run for office (*multiple counties*)

TOTAL: \$29,568

Goodbye and Thank You!



JENN SMALL

Jenn Small is the COO of AVRE (Association for Visual Rehabilitation and Employment) and therefore has a very demanding day job. That makes

us even more grateful that she was willing to give of her time and energy for the past six years to the welfare and empowerment of women and girls as a member of the Women's Fund Leadership Committee. Jenn has served as its vice chair and chair, and chair of our special events committee. That means she has been the driving force behind the most recent Women's Fund Breakfasts. Her leadership of our active and engaged group of volunteers has been inspirational, and we will truly miss her. But, because the 2020 breakfast was postponed until June 2021, we are thrilled that she has agreed to stay with us for one more year to help manage the event. So it's not really good-bye quite yet. We wish her all the best!