

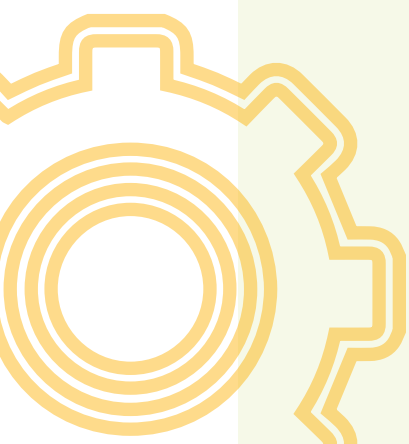


INTERSECTING BARRIERS:

Challenges to Economic Empowerment for Domestic Violence Survivors

January 2022

*This report was made possible by the generous support
of the Michael Reese Health Trust.*



Authored by Corinne Kodama and Lauren Wheeler

Edited by Sharmili Majmudar and Judy Miyashita

Designed by Amy Manzolino

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MICHAEL REESE

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Finally, this report would not have been possible without the survivors who shared their experiences via survey and focus groups. To safeguard their privacy, they remain anonymous.

About Women Employed:

Women Employed (WE) is an almost 50-year-old advocacy organization that pursues equity for women in the workforce by effecting policy change, expanding access to educational opportunities, and advocating for fair and inclusive workplaces so that all women, families, and communities can thrive. Our mission is to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity, with the bold social goal of closing the wealth gap at the intersection of race and gender.

For more information about Women Employed, visit womenemployed.org For more information about this report, contact Sharmili Majmudar, WE's Executive Vice President of Policy and Organizational Impact, at smajmudar@womenemployed.org.



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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.



Intersecting Barriers: Challenges to Economic Empowerment for Domestic Violence Survivors

In the United States, [1 in 4 women and 1 in 2 transgender individuals will be subjected to domestic violence](#) (DV). The Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline answered 28,749 Hotline calls and texts in 2020. While there is much focus on the physical and emotional harm from domestic violence, there is often not as much attention on the tremendous financial harm and economic insecurity that results from most abuse situations. In fact, [the Centers for Disease Control estimates that the lifetime economic cost of DV amounts to an average of \\$104,000](#) in losses associated with medical services for IPV-related injuries, lost productivity from paid work, criminal justice and other costs.

Within the group of low-income women facing barriers to economic advancement, domestic violence survivors have been particularly hard hit; prior to the pandemic, they were already facing economic devastation. Although domestic violence is experienced by people of all socio-economic groups, 40 percent of the survivors served in Illinois can be classified as having a low-socioeconomic status. [According to FreeFrom and me too.'s 2020 Measuring the Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Survivors of Color study](#), unemployment, unsafe work, food and housing insecurity, economic precarity, and health insecurity place heavy burdens on populations already facing trauma from violence. The study data shows that COVID-19-related financial insecurity is greatest among Black and Latina/x women survivors, and that financial security reduces the likelihood of returning to an abusive partner. This “collision of crises” threatens to have a negative impact on long-term outcomes for generations to come.

[About 99 percent of domestic violence survivors are subjected to economic abuse](#), where an abuser restricts or exploits a survivor’s financial resources. This economic abuse creates dependency and makes it extremely difficult for survivors to leave abusive situations. Thus, economic security is a critical factor to empower survivors to separate from abusive situations and establish stable environments for themselves and their families.


Employment can be the key to economic independence, and the ability of a survivor to earn their own income and support their families as they leave their abusive situation. Enabling more women to acquire better-quality jobs with family-sustaining wages is a key focus of Women Employed, and developing a better understanding of the employment needs for domestic violence survivors aligns with our mission to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity.


The existing research on the economic needs of survivors focuses primarily on the overall impact of domestic violence on economic well-being and developing financial literacy among survivors. While a FreeFrom report indicated that [60](#)

[percent of survivors lose their jobs as a result of DV](#), there is little research focused on the employment and workforce needs of survivors, despite recognizing a strong (but complicated) relationship between employment and economic well-being. In particular, the existing research does little to provide best practices or successful models of collaboration between DV service providers and workforce development (WFD) organizations.

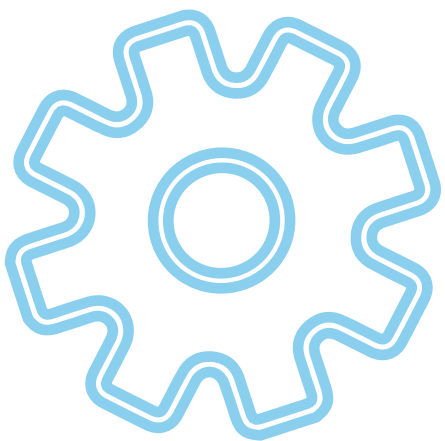
In this report we share findings from an investigation of the economic and workforce needs of domestic violence survivors in the Chicago metropolitan area. Not only did we discover how multiple intersecting economic challenges burden survivors and create barriers to employment, but also the ways in which accessing complicated social services as well as employers' lack of understanding makes it even more difficult for survivors to attain economic stability.

Our findings lead to key questions in imagining solutions which will set survivors on a path towards financial security:

 *What are the most pressing economic and employment needs of survivors and how can we better meet them?*

 *What are the possibilities for making explicit connections between those who understand the impact of DV on survivors and those who could help women enter or return to the workforce?*

We hope this report will not only shed light on these issues, but more importantly open a conversation about ways to address some of these needs through policy, best practices, and additional research. Women Employed seeks to leverage the insights of workforce development practitioners, domestic violence professionals, and survivors to craft solutions to address the pain points and



“Our society doesn’t give anyone, much less a survivor, space to heal. This is part of a much bigger problem. A lot of people suffer because our economy/ employment systems are exploitative. Wage stagnation. Debt peonage. Rentier finance. Any sane society would recognize the value in investing in the future, if only for their own self-preservation, but we treat women/ children and the environment like crap.”
-Survivor Survey Respondent

strengthen collaborations; we are aware of no other such effort in the greater Chicagoland area.

The data from this report comes from several sources including surveys, focus groups, and interviews with survivors, domestic violence advocates, and workforce development professionals, providing a diverse and comprehensive perspective on the issues. Quotes shared in this report may also come from any of the data sources (see Appendix for details on data collection and participant information). For purposes of this report, we will use the term “DV advocate” for a professional from a domestic violence organization, and “WFD professional” or “WFD practitioner” for someone who works in the workforce development space. The first question on the survivor survey asked about their overall top needs. Leaving their abusive situation was the most common answer (62 percent) followed by a need for counseling (49 percent). Employment was the third most popular answer at almost 45 percent. Throughout the surveys and focus groups the needs most frequently highlighted were related to basic economic needs more than employment. However, whether or not those identified needs appear to be directly related to employment, they intersect with each other in multiple ways and are difficult to separate in their impact. As one domestic violence advocate described:

“Some [survivors] haven’t worked for years because abusers haven’t let [them], some [are] in marital debt, [and] have to use credit cards to buy food, so already right off the bat from divorce [they could be] \$13,000 in debt, they can’t even work towards savings because they are already in a hole trying to get to even. So many jobs don’t offer flexibility. Getting a chair at Supercuts isn’t even worth it because people aren’t tipping, and the cost of renting a chair is more expensive than you earn. So, some people with skill sets don’t even sustain them. And education would be helpful, but then education is even so expensive so how do you connect them to that?”

To make sense of the intersecting and overlapping barriers, this report takes a somewhat developmental approach in its structure. The first section focuses on the basic economic and mental health needs of survivors, which lay the foundation for being able to successfully look for employment. This also includes a subsection on basic needs of immigrant (primarily undocumented) survivors, which was a prominent concern across the focus groups. The report then focuses on direct employment needs, primarily child care, which was the most frequently mentioned barrier, and intersected with almost every other issue raised. Other employment-related needs included career exploration and workforce development services, followed by specific challenges for survivors in the workplace. The final section discusses the unique challenges of the system of support services that DV survivors need to navigate, including an examination of the domestic violence and workforce development services landscape and the opportunities for more integrated resource and referral networks. Concluding the report is a series of recommendations drawing on what we learned from survivors, domestic violence advocates, and workforce development professionals in order to better meet the economic and employment needs of survivors.

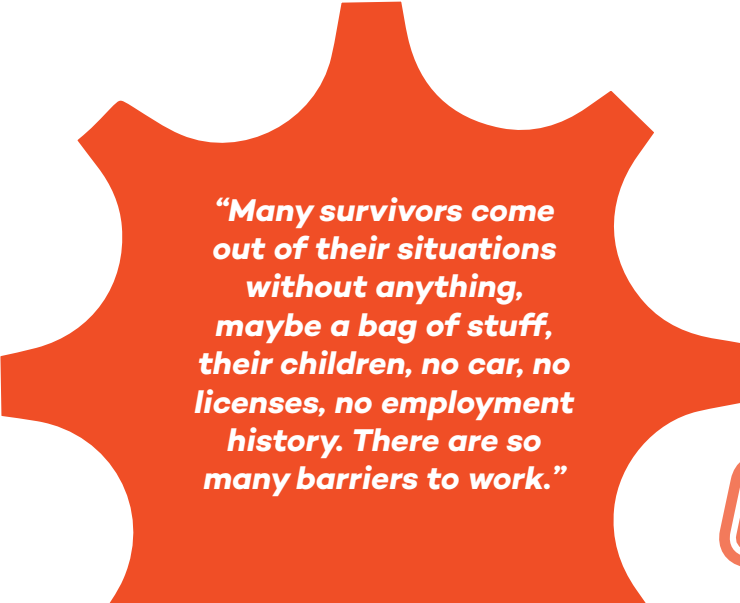
Basic Needs

Making Ends Meet

While this study seeks to understand the unique employment and workforce needs of domestic violence survivors, it is clear that broad-ranging, basic economic needs are the priority issues that need to be addressed before many can even think about looking for employment. One DV advocate explained, *“Many survivors come out of their situations without anything, maybe a bag of stuff, their children, no car, no licenses, no employment history. There are so many barriers to work.”* Over 40 percent of survivor survey respondents indicated that basic needs are their biggest priority as a survivor, just ahead of employment. As one survivor said, a challenge was *“...earning enough to maintain living expenses and economically empowering myself.”*

Focus groups with domestic violence advocates also emphasized client’s basic economic needs, given that they are primarily working with survivors in crisis for whom employment is often not the top priority. This may also have been reflected in some domestic violence advocates’ survey responses that many of their clients were not currently looking for a job.

Basic income is a key issue for survivors given that many of them are not only unemployed but may have no money to their name. Seventeen percent of survey respondents indicated unemployment insurance as a key economic need. Additionally, survivors often lack access to credit cards or bank accounts—typically withheld by their abuser—and others may even be in debt. ***Fifty-two percent of survivors reported annual incomes less than \$20,000, while 25 percent earned under \$10,000 respectively. At the same time, 49 percent indicated they were the primary breadwinner.*** This affects their ability to put food on the table, have a safe place to live, and even to function in everyday life. This lack of a stable income intersects with other basic needs including housing, transportation, health care, and employment, or lack thereof. Overwhelmed by these basic needs, as well as the lingering psychological effects of abuse, survivors expressed very low self-confidence, lack of self-worth, and often do not feel mentally prepared to put themselves out there for a job search.



“Many survivors come out of their situations without anything, maybe a bag of stuff, their children, no car, no licenses, no employment history. There are so many barriers to work.”




An initial barrier to obtaining social services, housing, employment, and other supports is a lack of legal documentation and records—such as a driver’s license (most frequently mentioned) or other documents like birth certificates or social security cards. Many survivors have lost documents upon leaving their situation, or they have been withheld by their abuser. Lacking these documents, or a stable address, it is extremely difficult to apply for anything. While it is possible to obtain new documents, there is typically a fee associated with most of those processes, which many survivors cannot afford because of their dire financial situation; additionally, an application for replaced documents often necessitates supplying other documents survivors lack. This is compounded for survivors who also may not have a cell phone or computer, making communication and transactions difficult.

Survivors also lack access to material items such as interview clothes or even things like a notebook or bag that would need purchased to be prepared to interview for jobs. As one survivor described, *“How do I buy a folder or paper or anything? Because I have no income. They do give funding with TANF for individuals with children, but for somebody like myself who’s either single or even somebody at my age would already have their children out of the house. There is no stipend to help someone in between.”*

Housing and Transportation

Housing instability is a huge challenge for many survivors as they worry about finding a safe and affordable place to live, particularly in the aftermath of leaving an abusive partner. Not having a permanent address is a big barrier for those applying for public assistance or a job, as one DV advocate pointed out, *“Housing and joblessness go hand in hand and those are big stressors for clients. You can’t get housing without a job and can’t get a job without an address.”* For those seeking housing, geographic placement is often a challenge, as one survivor described:

“The person in charge of my housing wanted to put me in the same neighborhood as my former abuser. And then she’s calling it a denial, and I’m like, that is not a denial of housing. That would just be stupidity, you know? And I’m like, nope even if that person doesn’t live in that neighborhood anymore, and I think they still do, I’m not going to be able to function at my best because of the triggers...”



“Housing and joblessness go hand in hand and those are big stressors for clients. You can’t get housing without a job and can’t get a job without an address.”

Additionally, a survivor's housing situation may change quickly and/or often, requiring significant time and energy to move. This causes disruptions to survivors' lives, often requiring time off from work for those who are employed. This can trigger shame and embarrassment as most survivors do not want to disclose to employers their housing situation. In fact, one DV advocate noted employer discrimination, *"I work with clients with children to help them with employment. We feel that most employers discriminate if you say that you are living in a shelter. They don't say it up front but the discrimination is obvious, sometimes you won't even get a job because of it."*

Access to affordable transportation creates additional barriers, depending on where survivors live and proximity to child care, social services, and/or work. Twenty percent of survivors surveyed indicated transportation as a key employment-related need, and **60 percent of domestic violence advocates surveyed reported that transportation is one of the specific job-related services that clients ask for (the second-most common request)**. This lack of transportation is often a direct result of their domestic violence situation, if their abuser has taken away their car, driver's license, or money to afford public transportation. For those relying on public transportation, there are considerable safety concerns, particularly if there is a long walk to the station and/or for those who work night shifts. This safety issue is compounded for survivors who are trying to stay away from their abuser and fear that they could easily be found waiting for public transportation, especially if they live in the same neighborhood. Additionally, public transportation is not accessible to everyone, as one advocate noted:

"[Many] families live in areas that have no public transportation and we are really struggling with that. We have tried to get a [job placement] program started but it is very hard without transportation, so we might be able to pick them up, but we can't keep doing that throughout the job..."

In many cases, geographic restrictions due to transportation issues severely limit survivors' options for workforce development and employment opportunities. As one client said:

"Sometimes even just thinking where's the location that makes sense that I could work and then drawing a diameter circle around what that area is and what's available. Because unfortunately, for me, I was taking the train downtown, dropping my kids off at school, taking the train back, it was like, I don't even know how I did it and it was a nightmare. So, I think, you know, unfortunately a lot of people are stuck choosing jobs just because of the visibility [proximity]."

COVID Impact

Housing was a particular challenge for those who wanted to work during the pandemic. While some jobs moved online, working from "home" was not an option for many survivors given they did not have a quiet place to work, either because of a roommate or the general atmosphere of a group living facility.


However, transportation issues were mitigated during the pandemic because of services and programs moving online. Some providers felt that it was easier for survivors to attend court dates and attend DV programs when they were online, *“I started practicing nine months ago and it has all been online. It is so much easier for clients to access court because it is online. I am wondering how much that would change if we ever go back. To be able to pop into court online makes it easier.”*

Trauma and Job Seeking

Because of both their economic situations and the impact of the abuse, many survivors who are currently seeking domestic violence support are too traumatized to look for a job. As one advocate described, *“Our clients are in less of a position to move forward with the workforce until things are more stable at their households. The idea of having your head right to do future planning and job training is a challenge when you are in crisis.”* Many spoke of survivors being overwhelmed with their situation and struggling with low self-confidence about their abilities. As one DV advocate explained:

“A lot of our clients may not be emotionally ready to reenter the job force depending on how severe the abuse was. There are a lot of things we are focusing on and want to make sure we are building them back up in a program where they feel comfortable and raising self-esteem for where they were before the abuse. Also, there are people who come in in crisis where they are 100 percent ready to work but they are trying to do everything they can to get out of this situation and out of the shelter, and people are at different points.”

Struggling with self-esteem as a result of DV-related trauma is especially difficult on survivors seeking employment, DV advocates noted that some can find it difficult to think about applying or interviewing for jobs because they have such low self-worth and do not really know how to present themselves positively in interview processes.

A decorative graphic featuring several gears. One gear is a solid orange shape with a white interior, containing a quote. Other gears are outlined in orange. The quote is:

“Our clients are in less of a position to move forward with the workforce until things are more stable at their households. The idea of having your head right to do future planning and job training is a challenge when you are in crisis.”

Additionally, it is challenging for survivors to explain employment gaps to future employers, and/or a possible criminal record that may be a result of DV (sometimes when survivors fight back, they are reported to the authorities by their abuser, resulting in criminal charges). This is coupled with the shame and stigma of being a DV survivor, and the ongoing impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) whether experiencing current abuse or not. One DV advocate shared, *“You can kind of see the triggers...In their body language I see tremors...you can’t function if all the chips are against you, [there are] feelings of embarrassment and failure.”*

Another DV advocate shared how she tries to encourage her clients to combat low self-esteem and keep them from feeling overwhelmed:

“I help victims time-manage; I will help them organize their lives. They have so much going on so I’ll say let’s focus on one box at a time and organize your life little by little... sometimes I am the only one who has told them ‘I am so proud of you for getting up and making coffee today and taking your son to the bus stop for school.’ No one has ever appreciated them, so they are always afraid of making mistakes because they are constantly criticized for it. That is the other part of it—the lack of understanding of the mindset and emotional side of victims. Because of their circumstances they are very anxious and very overwhelmed and there’s nobody for them to talk to.”

The lasting corrosive effects of trauma for survivors, coupled with their isolation, present significant hurdles to effective job seeking.

Barriers Faced by Immigrants

The basic economic challenges for survivors are exacerbated for immigrants, and particularly those who are undocumented, a frequent theme which reflected the diversity of the Chicagoland population. While we reached out to DV organizations which primarily served immigrant communities to ensure a diverse sample, it was notable that undocumented issues arose in every focus group with DV advocates.

The challenges of being undocumented affect virtually every aspect of survivors’ lives. Without the proper documents (social security card, driver’s license, U.S. birth certificate, etc.), undocumented immigrants are not eligible for most state or federally funded resources and programs (including healthcare), cannot be hired by most employers, are not eligible for some workforce development or education programs, and fear being deported and separated from their children. As one advocate who works in a DV organization primarily serving immigrants explained, *“Usually when we try to explore training, because my clients are undocumented, they want to focus first on getting the papers, so we don’t explore that training.”*

As a result, undocumented immigrants often are forced to work and be paid under the table. With such limited opportunities, options to refer undocumented clients for work were often based on personal relationships between DV

providers and “undocumented-friendly” employers they happened to know. In focus groups DV providers who worked primarily with immigrant survivors described how these employment referrals developed somewhat randomly—finding out through the grapevine that a particular employer would hire undocumented people, most often restaurants with low-paid positions. This creates additional vulnerability as providers expressed that their immigrant clients experienced harassment or were taken advantage of with low or delayed wages; one workforce development professional shared their concerns:

“I had one student who applied for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) and applied for Social Security but couldn’t get it so she was working without getting paid and...I tried to explain to the employer that she was waiting for the Social Security card—this student didn’t get paid and at some point couldn’t get child care and then couldn’t go to work because of it, the employer didn’t understand so they let her go and asked her not to come back...at the end we insisted on the payment because she got the Social Security card but she wasn’t paid until two months later...”

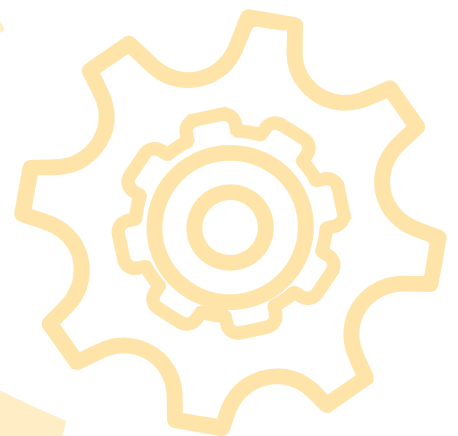
However, many **undocumented survivors often leave these kinds of workplace harassment unaddressed as they feel they lack rights to confront certain behaviors (or do not have the language skills to advocate for themselves).**

Undocumented immigrants also carry the fear of being deported so rarely speak up. As one advocate described:

“We get a lot of undocumented survivors that are afraid to get real jobs, afraid because of cultural issues and DV issues, they don’t know the language, they don’t know how to find a job. They walk into a restaurant and ask for a job, they work for a few days and those people will not pay them, and they don’t know how to ask for their money.”

Additionally, some workforce development professionals are prevented from working with undocumented survivors because of organizational or governmental policies. As one domestic violence advocate stated, “A lot of times if they are

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undocumented, they won't be able to get that job and we can't help them with under-the-table jobs because that is illegal for us."

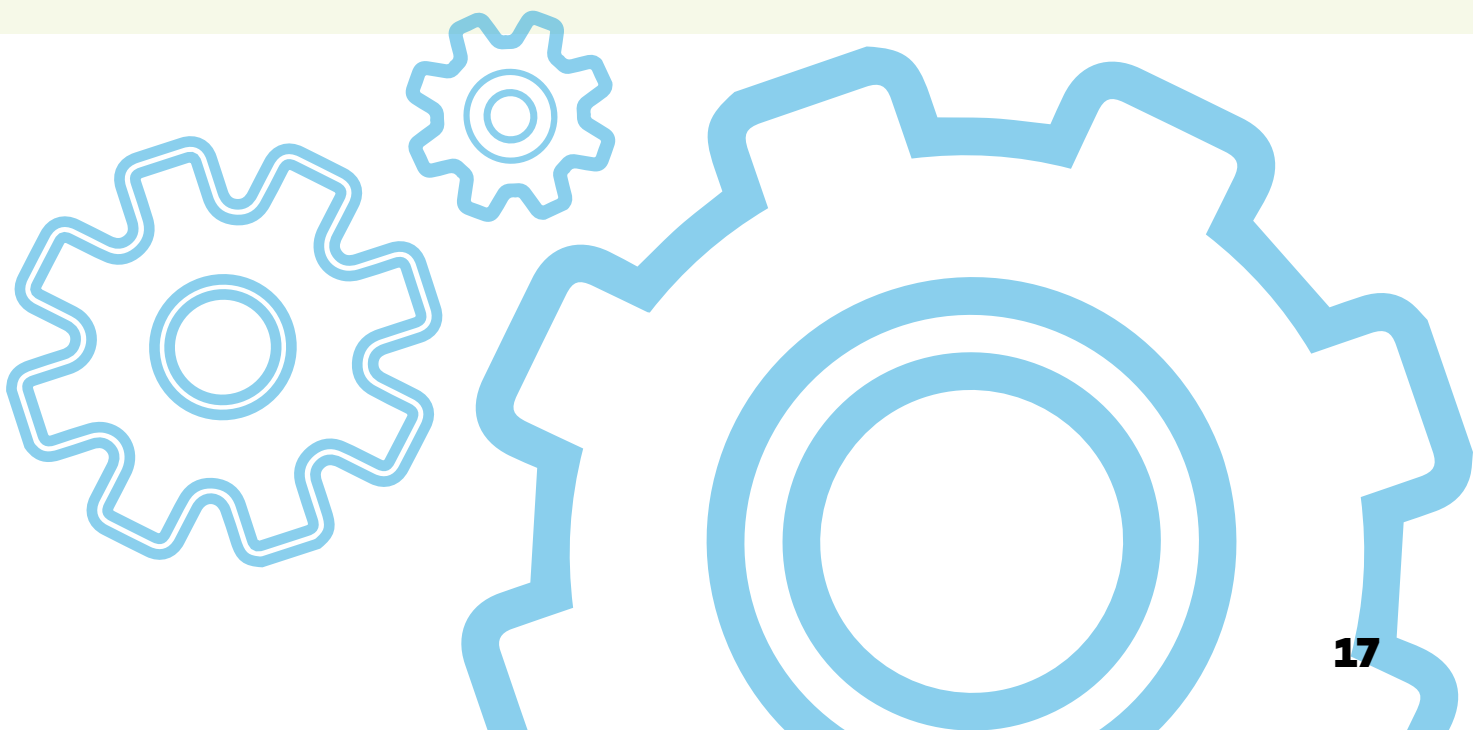
Language access is a huge challenge for many immigrant survivors, documented or not. Limited English often means that they can only obtain jobs within their communities of shared language and culture, limiting their opportunities. This often makes survivors even more nervous about their domestic violence situation given these communities are often very small, and everyone knows one another. As one advocate described, *"Because of the language barrier, they often find a job in the community, so if someone needs to report to work but can't because of the husband they are afraid to bring up the issues because that information will spread, and it would not be safe."*

Undocumented status and limited English are particular challenges for survivors who have education or credentials from another country that are not accepted in the U.S. These survivors are often severely underemployed and frustrated by their limited opportunities. Limited English also makes it difficult for survivors to participate in workforce development programs or additional education due to language barriers.

It is also important to note that while some of the challenges captured in this section affect both immigrants and people without documents, there are additional barriers to those lacking documentation. In recognizing the different processes and issues for immigrant survivors, one advocate suggested, *"We need two tracks of services—one when survivors do not have employment authorization; and one after they receive it."*

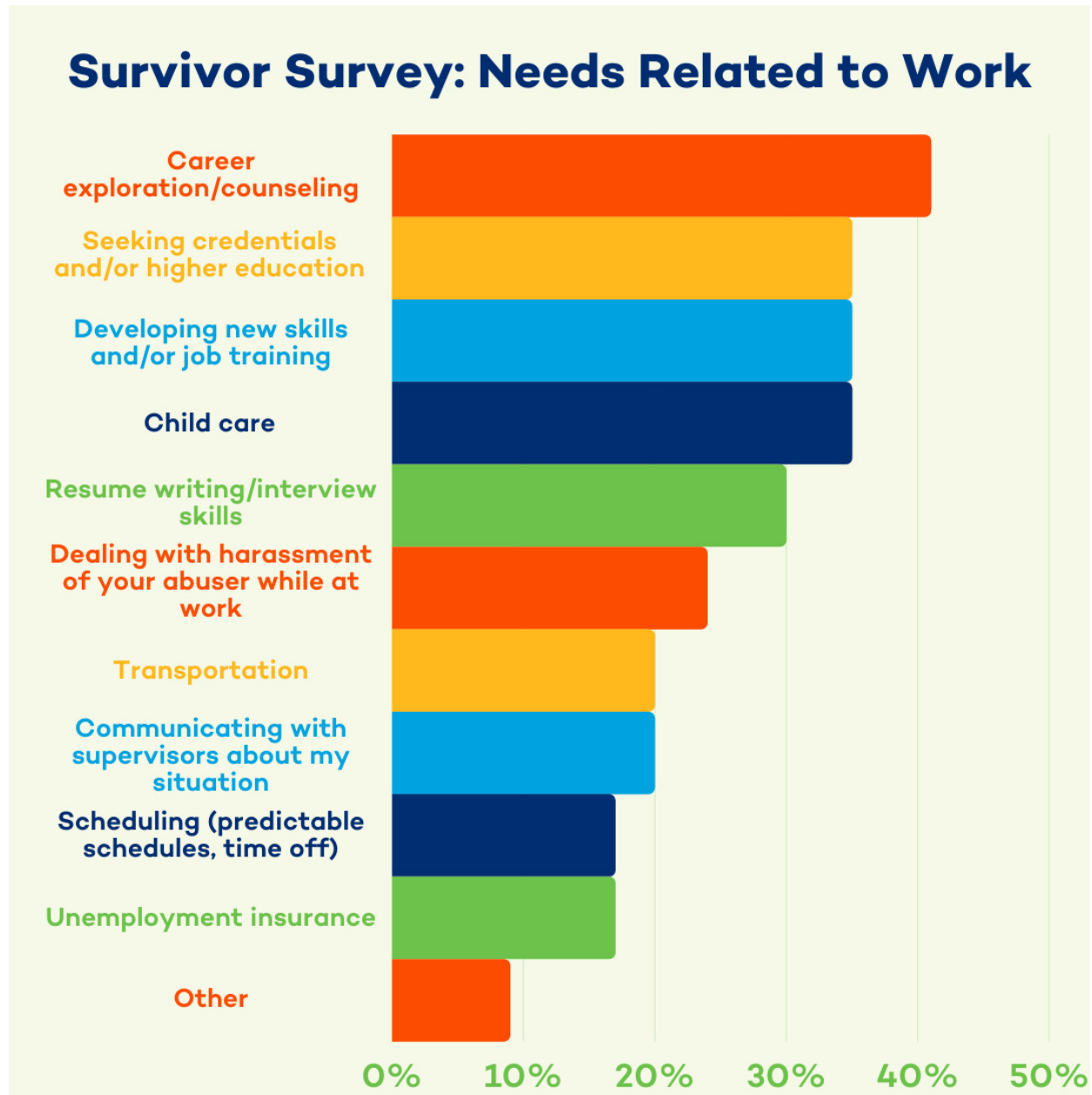
COVID Impact

People without documents were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic as the sectors in which many worked, including service jobs, were hardest hit. Additionally, people without documents were not eligible for most stimulus relief checks and were thus in even more precarious financial distress.



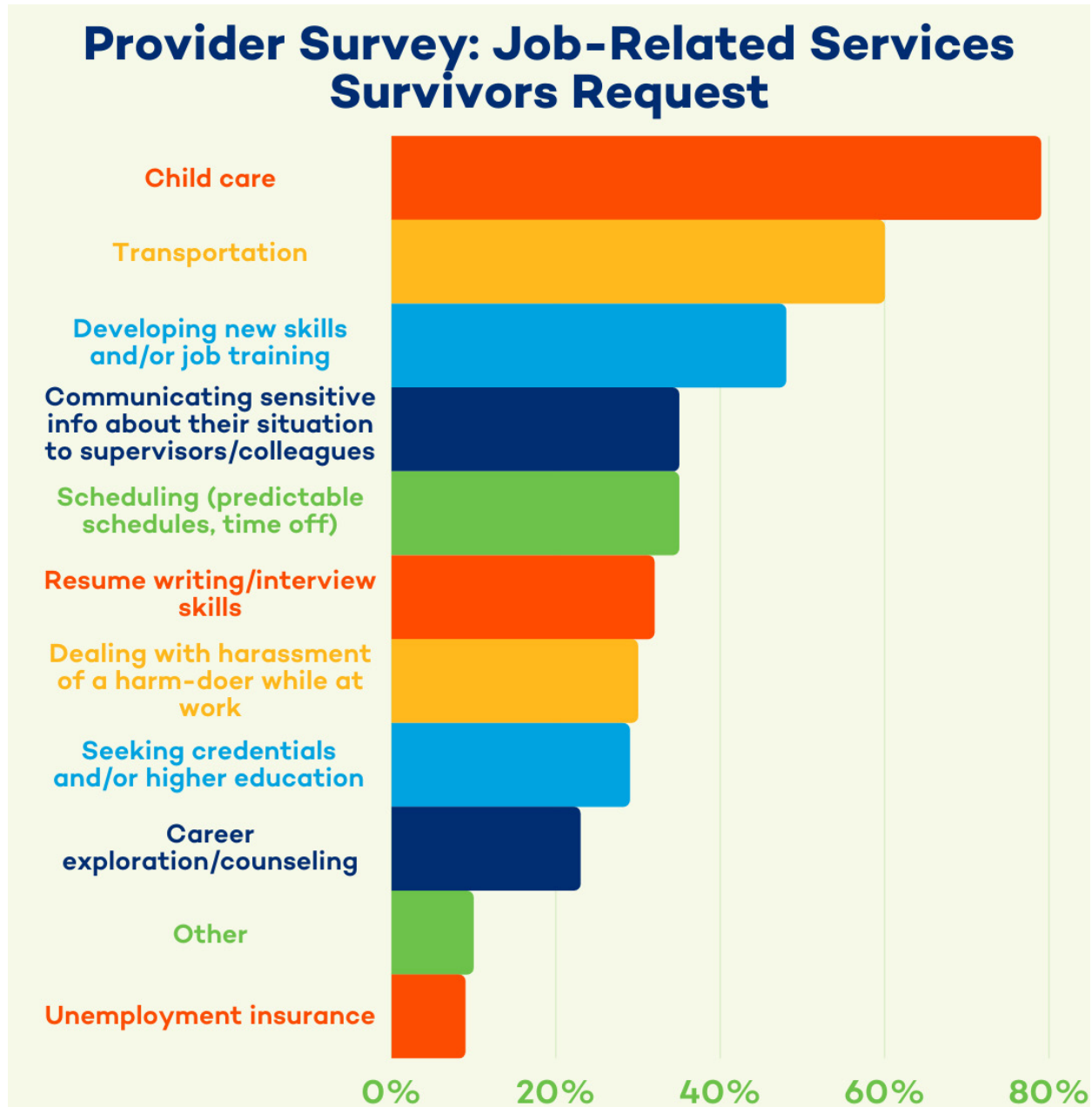
Work-Related Needs

There were a wide range of intersecting challenges that arose for survivors in looking for work as well as maintaining employment, which in combination became significant barriers to economic security. In the words of one service provider, “Women are not afraid of working. They want to work and make money. It is how to get there and how to do it that is the challenge.”



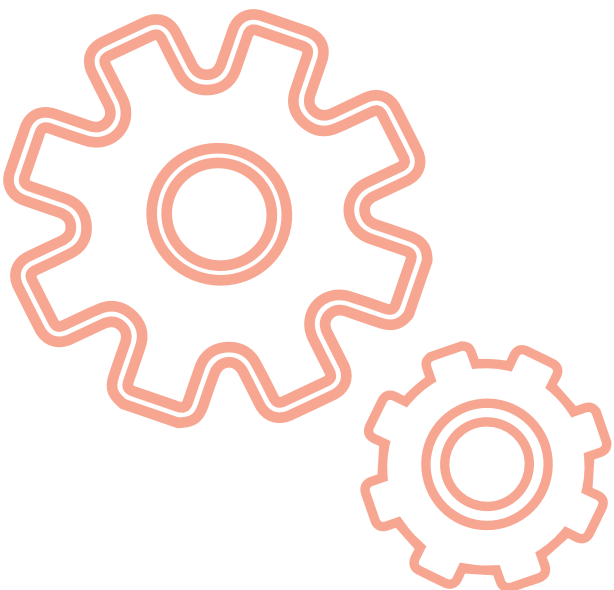
According to survivors, their top needs related to work are career exploration (41 percent), seeking credentials (35 percent), developing new skills/job training (35 percent), and child care (35 percent). Thirty percent identified resume writing as an important need. Dealing with harassment from their abuser was reported by 24 percent of survey respondents, and 20 percent reported communicating

with their supervisor related to their DV situation as a top need. Other work-related needs included transportation (20 percent), scheduling (17 percent), and unemployment insurance (17 percent). It is interesting, however, that in the focus groups and interviews, these were not necessarily the top needs mentioned, which could point to differences in participants.



For example, in the survey of domestic violence advocates, in response to job-related services that survivors asked for, their top responses were child care (80 percent), transportation (60 percent), and developing new skills/job training (49 percent). Scheduling and communicating with supervisors around their DV situation were at 35 percent each and dealing with harassment from abuser at work was 30 percent.

Combining survey responses with the focus groups gave us a fuller picture of the economic and employment needs of domestic violence survivors. While all the issues above arose in our conversations, there were a few recurring themes that arose prominently across the data sources for this study which will be highlighted in the following pages.



“Women are not afraid of working. They want to work and make money. It is how to get there and how to do it that is the challenge.”

Child Care

Throughout all the surveys, focus groups, and interviews, child care was mentioned as an overwhelming need for survivors who desired to work. ***Eighty percent of survivor survey respondents indicated that they had children under 18***, giving a sense of the scope of this challenge.

On the survivor survey, child care was the second-ranked work-related need. While the numbers of survivors prioritizing child care on the survey was not as high as expected, it was specifically mentioned in many open-ended responses to a wide range of questions, even when the prompt did not specifically ask about child care. Some survivor survey respondents shared that their families were particularly helpful with their DV situation because they were able to help care for their children. While only 31 percent of employed survivors said child care was a need, 55 percent of those who were in school or job training indicated child care was their number one challenge. It may be that employed survivors had already figured out their child care situation or had more options compared to those in job-training programs or higher education. In fact, in conversations with DV advocates child care was mentioned as a barrier to effective partnerships with WFD organizations since many job training or education programs do not have child care available to participants.

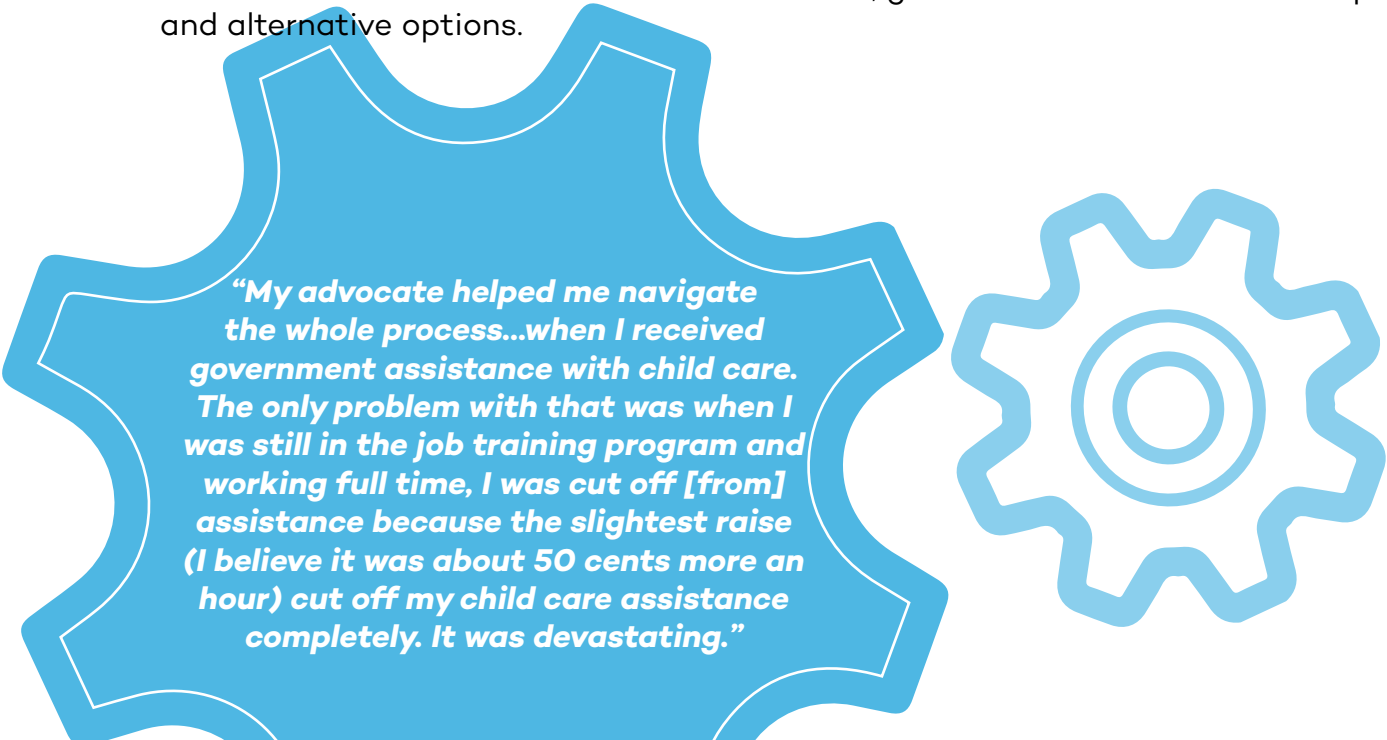
The impact of child care was further emphasized by DV providers who worked directly with survivors, as ***80 percent of surveyed domestic violence providers indicated that child care was a job-related service that survivors asked for***

help with—by far the most popular response. Child care needs came up in every single focus group—for both DV providers and WFD professionals—as one of the biggest challenges in helping survivors with employment needs. Child care was mentioned as the reason that many survivors are not working or seeking employment, exemplified by this survivor’s comment, *“Be sure to take care of the children. Children are more important than work.”*

While child care is a challenge for many parents, it is especially crucial for DV survivors who are often single or in the process of separating from a partner. In fact, they often worry about their abuser showing up at a child care facility for an unauthorized pickup or otherwise trying to take their children away from them. Caring for children is particularly fraught when survivors are going through divorce proceedings—there is concern that putting children in childcare would reflect negatively on custody challenges. One provider shared the sentiment of a judge who oversaw her client’s custody hearing, *“...you just put your child in daycare, why do you want sole custody?”*

It is important to note that child care is important to all survivors regardless of employment status. In fact, temporary child care seems to be a particular need for survivors, not just for work but also for job-seeking, court dates, recovery from incidents of abuse, or other DV-related emergencies. As a result, one survivor mentioned missing job interviews because she had no one to care for her children during that time.

For employed survivors, another need is for flexible work hours so that survivors can transport their children to and from school, especially since it seemed that most survivors did not have reliable child care. This also was the case for survivors who are not comfortable putting their children in child care because of their domestic violence situation. Additionally, there is a need for child cares to be open past standard 7 a.m. – 6 p.m. hours given that many employed survivors often have work shifts that are longer, on weekends, or outside of the traditional 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. workday. Summer is also a particular challenge when schools are closed and it is difficult to find affordable care, given the cost of summer camps and alternative options.



“My advocate helped me navigate the whole process...when I received government assistance with child care. The only problem with that was when I was still in the job training program and working full time, I was cut off [from] assistance because the slightest raise (I believe it was about 50 cents more an hour) cut off my child care assistance completely. It was devastating.”

Perhaps the most common challenge, however, is the cost of child care, which puts survivors in an impossible bind: they can't work because they can't afford child care, and they can't afford child care because they don't make enough money at work. As one advocate described, *"Child care is THE biggest problem for people experiencing domestic violence-one person said the cost was \$3,000 a month and she only makes \$600 a month and that's all she can make because she doesn't have child care."*

For the survivors who do manage to connect to assistance, the current system of aid can feel tumultuous. As survivors start to make economic advances, supports are often removed causing them to lose income eligibility, which feels like an arduous cycle of slipping back into poverty. One survivor shared:

"My advocate helped me navigate the whole process...when I received government assistance with child care. The only problem with that was when I was still in the job training program and working full time, I was cut off [from] assistance because the slightest raise (I believe it was about 50 cents more an hour) cut off my child care assistance completely. It was devastating."

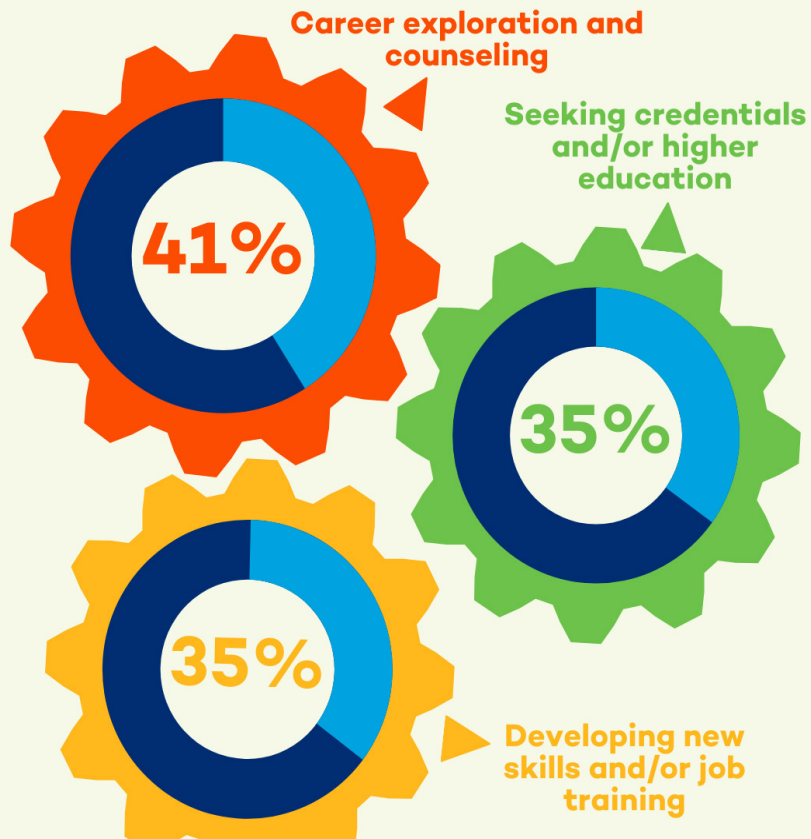
COVID Impact

The impact of the pandemic on child care issues cannot be overstated. With schools and many daycares closed for well over a year, women had few if any options for child care, making it very difficult, if not impossible, for women to go to work. Thus, many women left, or did not enter the workforce, while other women tried to piece together child care and/or left children without care for periods of time in order to keep a job and much-needed income. One advocate emphasized the catch-22, *"During COVID you had nowhere to put kids [when] you had to go to work, then survivors are blamed."*

Job Training and Skill Development

Given many survivors' immediate economic needs, job searching is typically a response to an immediate need for income rather than an intentional plan to connect to meaningful and sustaining work. However, this does not mean that survivors are not interested in upskilling or preparing for better jobs. In contrast, other than child care, the top three employment-related needs identified by survivors were: **1) career exploration and counseling (41 percent); 2) seeking credentials and/or higher education (35 percent); and 3) developing new skills and/or job training (35 percent).** This is not surprising given that we heard throughout the study that many survivors have never worked, or at least have not worked recently, often because of caregiving responsibilities or their abuse situation. However, it is notable that these upskilling needs were still the top three even for survivors who were currently employed (either part-time or full-time), though to a lesser degree.

The Top 3 Employment-Related Needs Identified by Survivors



However, for those interested in job training and skill development, there are many barriers to participation, including cost, location, and child care. The biggest need identified for survivors attending school or job training was child care (55 percent), even more than for employed survivors. For some programs, strict attendance requirements and cohort models are often difficult for DV survivors to uphold because of their ever-changing schedule, either due to incidents of abuse, court cases, caregiving, or other disruptions. As one DV advocate described, *“...a challenge is competing priorities, with challenges, child care, and trauma, the thought of that type of program is overwhelming to tackle.”*

In fact, more survivors in job training and school expressed challenges with scheduling (33 percent) than those who were employed (23 percent). One survivor explained, *“For me, I always feel like whenever anything [lasts] more than a couple of nights, I can’t ... cause I don’t know what [my] schedule is going to be.”*

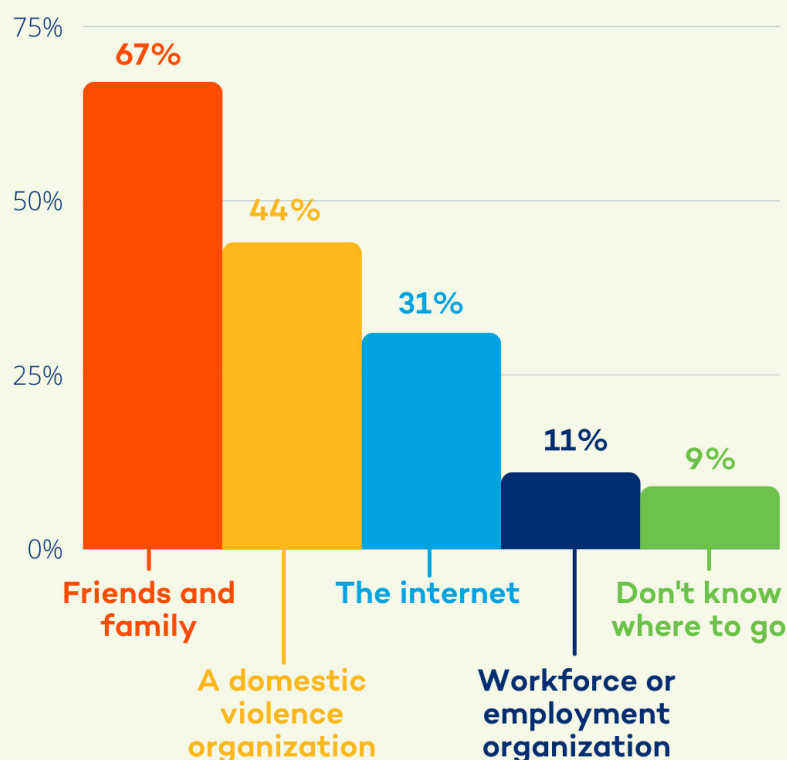
Transportation was a need for 26 percent of surveyed survivors attending school or job training, reflecting the importance of geographic proximity for access. In fact, one survivor mentioned that she chose a housing shelter specifically because it was only a couple of blocks away from a community college that had workforce training programs she could easily take advantage of. Other needs included partners’ interference with survivors’ educational and job training programs (23 percent) and communicating with instructors about their DV situation (23 percent). Perhaps as a result of these barriers, only about 30

percent of survivors had gone back to school since they left their DV situation, and 11 percent had participated in a job-training program. For context, in terms of educational attainment, 47 percent of survey respondents had at least a bachelor's degree, 22 percent had some college, 18 percent had a high school diploma or equivalent, and 13 percent did not finish high school.

Despite the importance that survivors put on career exploration, job training, and education, however, these issues came up rarely in the interviews or focus groups with DV advocates. While 65 percent of DV service providers surveyed mentioned clients were primarily looking for jobs, in the focus groups we most often heard that the survivors they worked with are not yet ready for workforce development services, or that the logistics and scheduling of participation were too big of barriers. That may be because at the point of frequent contact with DV professionals, survivors are often in crisis or focused on immediate basic needs. However, other survey results showed that perhaps survivors did not raise work issues as much with DV professionals despite that being a need.

When asked about where they seek help for work-related needs, two-thirds of survivors responded that they ask friends and family. Forty-four percent asked a domestic violence organization, and 31 percent went to the internet. Only 11 percent said workforce or employment organization, but 9 percent also said they did not know where to go. When asked who was the biggest help, most said family, followed by friends and DV advocates. It appeared that few survivors had directly accessed any workforce development services without the intervention of a DV professional.

When Survivors Were Asked Where They Seek Help for Work-Related Needs:



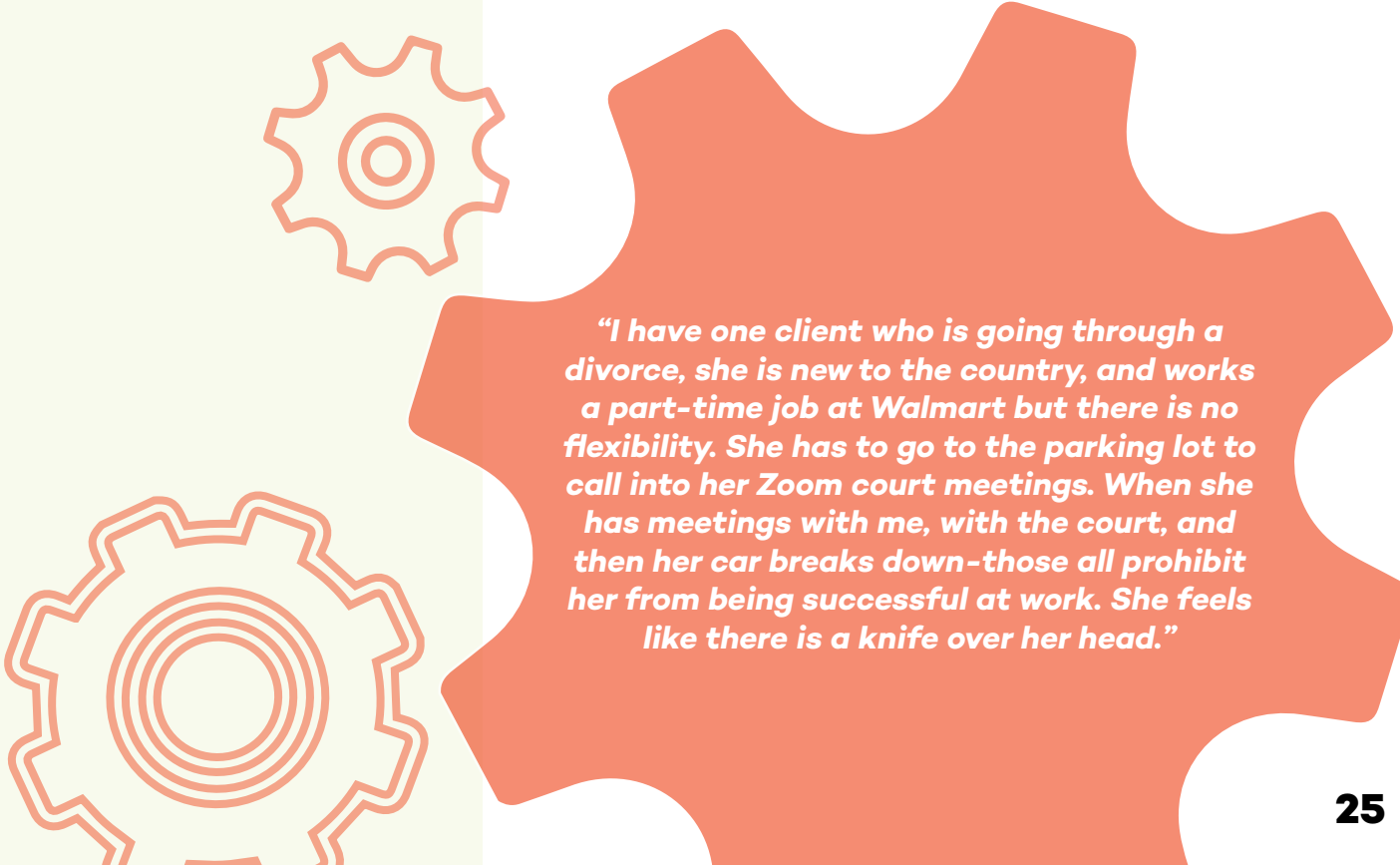
Impact of Domestic Violence at Work

Seventy percent of survivor survey respondents were employed (almost equally split between full time and part time). For employed survivors, there were specific challenges related to their DV situation that impact their job attendance, performance, and long-term employment. The most frequently mentioned issues included a need for flexible scheduling, concerns about safety at work, and the shame of being a survivor in the workplace. Given that many survivors are reluctant to disclose their DV status to their employer, this often results in challenges accessing workplace rights, resources, and services.

Flexible Scheduling

One of the needs for survivors that was communicated both in the surveys and throughout the focus groups was the necessity for all parties supporting and working with survivors to recognize their critical need for flexibility. Twenty-three percent of employed survivors and 44 percent of those attending school or job training said that scheduling was a particular challenge due to navigating multiple responsibilities including child care, court hearings and meetings with legal counsel, finding or maintaining employment and/or education, and safety. As one provider described:

“I have one client who is going through a divorce, she is new to the country, and works a part-time job at Walmart but there is no flexibility. She has to go to the parking lot to call into her Zoom court meetings. When she has meetings with me, with the court, and then her car breaks down-those all prohibit her from being successful at work. She feels like there is a knife over her head.”

A decorative graphic featuring three gears of varying sizes and colors. One gear is a solid orange color, while the other two are outlined in orange. The gears are arranged in a cluster, with the largest one at the bottom left and the smallest one at the top left. The orange gear is partially overlapping the other two.

“I have one client who is going through a divorce, she is new to the country, and works a part-time job at Walmart but there is no flexibility. She has to go to the parking lot to call into her Zoom court meetings. When she has meetings with me, with the court, and then her car breaks down-those all prohibit her from being successful at work. She feels like there is a knife over her head.”

Not only do these competing challenges burden survivors, but they also emphasize employers' lack of understanding of the survivor reality and sometimes refusal to negotiate schedules around needs. Consequently, this adds to survivors' fears of disclosing their situations. One survivor described one of her biggest challenges as, "...trying to explain to my employer what I was going to when I would have to take off of work, for court dates, for counseling for my children, for counseling for myself, or for emergencies with my children related to the trauma they experienced." This common need was; confirmed by a DV provider:

"On the topic of flexibility—I had a client that worked downtown and only used public transit. It wasn't possible to pick her kids up from school. She requested to leave 15 minutes early to pick up her kids and her employer said 'absolutely not' even though she volunteered to work during break time."

Additionally, the lives of many DV survivors can be chaotic as changes occur quickly due to abuse, housing situations, and related DV issues so survivors' work situations may change frequently. As one survivor explained:

"I couldn't explain to my supervisor why last week I told you, 'Hey, I don't have an internet connection right now. I'm in a transition process between apartments. I'm not setting up internet.' That... was my excuse why I couldn't work from home. And then the next week, I'm like, 'Hey, I can only work from home,' [because my shelter was in lockdown due to COVID]. It's like what? And that's what happens a lot with DV. You say one thing to an employer and then it's like...you got to say something else. So, they literally look at you like you're crazy. And it's not that you're lying, it's your circumstances."

Safety

Some employed survivors described the challenges of ongoing abuse interfering with their work, which either caused them to underperform, quit, or get fired from their job. **Twenty-six percent of employed survivor described experiencing harassment from their abuser at work, mirrored by the 30 percent of DV providers surveyed whose clients asked them to help with this issue.** There are several ways in which this manifested: having to go to work after experiencing abuse; the abuser harassing the survivor at work; and the mental health toll of abuse that made it difficult to concentrate at work.

Survivors described the challenges of going to work amidst ongoing abuse. One survivor described how her abuser would harass her in the morning, sometimes as she was leaving for work, which put her in a bad state of mind to start the workday. Others described injuries from physical abuse that in serious cases required them to miss work to recover. However, even less severe cases left physical evidence or scars which often caused survivors to avoid developing interpersonal relationships at work so they wouldn't have to answer questions.

In some cases, abusers directly interfere with work, by showing up onsite or calling/emailing survivors while at work or at school. This sometimes becomes a problem with their workplace and colleagues/supervisors, as described by one DV provider:

“A client’s abuser has been harassing her at work to try to stop [her from] working. She is not comfortable addressing the issue with the employer. Employers want nothing to do with the issues, they blame the person experiencing abuse for it. There needs to be more employer sympathy. Survivors shouldn’t be penalized for it, just because they have more anxiety doesn’t make them not a good employee.”

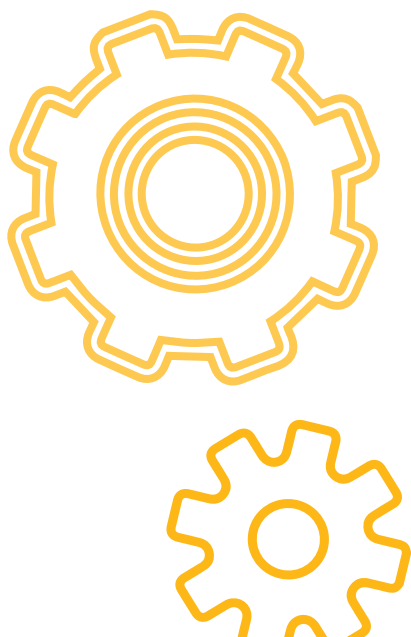
This is particularly important given that in some cases the harassment is intentionally to try to get survivors fired so survivors would be financially dependent on the abusers again.

Many DV survivors have to choose between their jobs (economic security which they need for legal fees, child care, health insurance, etc.) or resolving their DV situation (missing work for court cases, mental health, etc.) and often they choose their jobs. One DV advocate shared, *“As a legal department, we often see survivors who would rather lose their order of protection than disclose the reason they need time off to their supervisor.”* This in turn may result in it taking a longer time to resolve their DV situation, if at all.

Trauma and Mental Health

A frequently mentioned challenge for employed DV survivors was how trauma impacted their mental health, and consequently their ability to fully function at work. Whether due to current abuse, legal obligations, court cases or divorce proceedings, it was difficult to concentrate, particularly since most of them did not reveal their DV status to their coworkers or supervisors.

The toll of abuse over time can also affect survivors’ sense of self-worth, as one survivor remarked, *“I believe it’s definitely affected my career. At one point I had such a loss of self-esteem and confidence in myself I didn’t know if I could work anymore.”*



“I believe it's [domestic violence] definitely affected my career. At one point I had such a loss of self-esteem and confidence in myself I didn't know if I could work anymore.”

This shame and stigma often keeps survivors from revealing their status at work, even if doing so would make it easier to ask for needed time off to deal with related issues. From the survey, **20 percent of employed survivors expressed challenges communicating with their employer about their DV situation.** Survivors worry their coworkers will think they are unreliable or not committed to work. As one survivor explained,

“When I first started my job...I didn’t want to say I’m going to court, but I [needed] a couple of hours off and so that was kind of difficult. And then I eventually did have to tell my employer why I was taking all this time and they did understand but it was...something I didn’t want to do...I didn’t know them very well. And it’s personal information...nobody wants to talk about it. So...after I did it, I was glad I did it, but I wish I maybe I did it a little earlier, would’ve made things a little easier. I think they just kinda thought like I was...pretending like I was sick or [something].”

Some survivors leave their jobs rather than explain their domestic violence situation and its impact. Survivors who mentioned this as an issue took great pride in their work and wanted to be seen as valued employees and keep their personal life out of the workplace. As one survivor stated, *“I felt shame in sharing my situation with my employer because I didn’t want them to think less of me.”* Similarly, survivors mentioned that they see work as an important part of contributing to their self-worth, identity, and mental health, not just a means of income.

Some survivors said it would have helped if their employers shared resources and education about domestic violence directly, but others mentioned that their work DID have support for DV survivors, but they were not ready to tell their supervisors in order to access those services. Instead, some survivors utilized services under the guise of general mental health rather than DV. For example, when taking advantage of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for mental health support, one survivor never revealed their DV status, even after a hospitalization stay due to abuse where she was absent from work for a couple of months. Trauma-induced mental health issues followed, which required another leave, during which time she still did not tell her employer the real reason why and eventually was let go because she could not give them a firm date of return to work.


Rights and Resources

Another theme which arose among employed survivors was the issue of workplace resources and/or rights, whether it be related to mental health support, needing time off for recovery from incidents of abuse, or court dates. Some survivors are more informed of their rights than others, most often because they have learned from their domestic violence advocates. It is also important to acknowledge the differences in access to resources depending on the type of employer, for example survivors with white-collar jobs or larger employers likely will have more workplace supports than those in minimum wage jobs. Survivors who are knowledgeable about their rights often found their employers and/or human resources departments were not:

“The onus on finding and keeping a job is on us, and that’s messed up. We shouldn’t have to disclose our survivorship in order to get through a hard day at work or big emotions. That should be on the employers. We have enough baggage. My DV experience was bad, but I’ve been retraumatized so much now by bad bosses that I can honestly say surviving out in the world afterward has been harder.”

This was confirmed by DV providers who often have to advocate for their clients in the workplace. However, many employees are not sure what supports are available or where to ask for help (or even what to ask for), while others are unwilling to ask for support because they do not want to reveal their survivor status. Others found workplace supports lacking such as the survivor who shared, *“I went through HR to disclose my status and was told I could receive an ‘accommodation.’ But my supervisor would not cooperate and since then I have felt ‘marked’ as a bad person.”*

A couple of employees mentioned taking advantage of EAPs at work. While they found the mental health support helpful, there were mixed reviews on whether or not the EAP counselor was informed on domestic violence issues. One survivor had a particularly troubling interaction, *“I contacted my EAP to assist me in communicating my DV issue and how it related to my attendance issues. My EAP provider was not very helpful with providing support in this area and to be honest suggested I resign from my position.”* Another employee mentioned that their EAP had a limit of three sessions, so there was only so much it could help given their need for ongoing support.



“I went through HR to disclose my status and was told I could receive an ‘accommodation.’ But my supervisor would not cooperate and since then I have felt ‘marked’ as a bad person.”

Some survivors and providers brought up the [Victims' Economic Security and Safety Act \(VESSA\)](#), which provides state-mandated unpaid leave for DV (and other gender-based violence) survivors while protecting their employment. It is worth noting, however, that even some DV advocates do not know much about VESSA or how to access it. While theoretically VESSA should help DV victims with some of their workplace challenges, it does not always. First, survivors (or their DV advocates) need to know about VESSA, but many do not. Second, survivors often do not want to disclose their DV status to their workplace, which is a requirement to access VESSA. As one DV advocate noted, *"There needs to be generous time off; I understand there is a law to protect that, but it is vulnerable to disclose to an employer."* Third, many employers are not aware of VESSA (both supervisors and HR departments), and even if they are, they may not care. One DV advocate shared:

"I have sadly seen a lot of employers who are like 'I don't care about VESSA—you need to be here.'... Most employers are not receptive to VESSA. They see it as a nuisance, they don't tend to believe survivors because they'll say, 'well they showed up to work and they seemed happy.' They think it is an employee misusing a legal remedy to just get more time off at their expense... A large part of what I am doing is connecting clients to services to assist them to make sure they get the remedies recognized under VESSA so they don't have to choose between [addressing] their DV situation and their employment."

Thus, utilizing VESSA often involves an advocate from a domestic violence support provider advocating on a survivor's behalf with a supervisor or HR representative. Finally, leave from VESSA, while protecting a survivor's job, is unpaid, and the reality is that most DV survivors need the income because of their economic situation.

COVID Impact

A positive thing that came out of the pandemic was that some court proceedings and other required meetings moved online. This gave clients some flexibility to attend without having to worry about leaving work for as long. Other DV advocates felt that online appointments/groups did not work because survivors really wanted that in-person time. Additionally, sometimes online support is not possible because survivors don't have a computer or a safe space to conference in if they are still living with their abuser. One DV advocate shared, *"Virtual groups have been good during the pandemic, but the in-person ones have been sparsely attended—also contact is a difficult piece because we can't blast them with emails because that creates a safety issue."*

Support Services Needs

Bureaucratic Barriers

A frequent theme that came up from DV providers is the barriers that the layers of bureaucracy at the local, state, and federal levels present in receiving many social services, including processes, documentation, and time. ***The irony is that DV survivors are a population in critical need of accessing government or agency supports (e.g., financial assistance, temporary housing, child care, workforce development) but are often least able to apply to them because of their financial situation, lack of documents, and policies that do not fit their reality.*** The time and energy needed to apply for various social services and navigate bureaucratic systems to leave their abusive situations can be overwhelming and confusing. Application processes and program rules are often described as strict and/or challenging to navigate. Even the process of having to fill out more forms and verify information for an overwhelmed survivor can be enough to keep them from continuing the application process.

One specific challenge brought up multiple times was strict income limits or rules for qualifying for financial assistance without regard for a survivor's complex personal situation. Given the typically lengthy process of a formal separation or divorce, many survivors are still technically married to their abusers on paper which means their partner's income counted "against" them in applying for public assistance. Additionally, many abusers cut off all access to financial resources from the survivor, including bank accounts or credit cards etc., so while it looks like they have income on paper, in reality they have nothing. And despite the available waiver of work requirements for domestic violence survivors to apply for TANF, [the process requires proof of the abuse, which can be difficult to provide.](#)

One survivor spoke of the many rules and regulations of shelters and group living facilities which posed a significant barrier to her ability to interview for or keep a job (she was actually fired because of it). These included strict in and out privileges, rigid rules for shower use, onboarding/meeting requirements that occurred during work hours, lack of privacy (for interviews and/or phone and video meetings), and poor internet service. While residents understood the need for these policies, they found them to be significant barriers to employment (which ironically shelters and DV providers strongly encouraged yet did not always provide direct support for). For this survivor, who moved to a new shelter, she had to meet with intake staff within 48 hours of being onsite—which occurred during work hours, creating another obligation that required time off from work.

Additionally, ***DV advocates shared that survivors are often reluctant to ask for help because of their lack of trust in the system, often based on previous experience.*** Because of the barriers mentioned above, as well as their lack of self-esteem, they often are frustrated with asking for help and get passed from place to place. As a result, advocates said that they are careful in referring survivors to other organizations if they do not personally know someone there or do not have assurance that the survivor will be responded to directly and promptly. Otherwise, this adds to some survivors' sense of pessimism and

lack of hope that anyone will be able to help them, because they've been let down before. This may be one of the reasons why survey responses showed that survivors much more often asked friends and family to help with their employment needs rather than an organization or agency.

Finally, a huge systemic challenge that came up repeatedly was the need for jobs that paid family-sustaining wages, without which it may not even make sense for survivors to go back to work given their economic and child care needs. As one domestic violence advocate said:

“We are talking about identifying DV—but talking about the employment side of it, they are going to continue to stay in that situation if they can't take care of themselves, if they can't sustain for their families they will end up right back where they are. We once placed someone in a shelter and though she had a job, she couldn't take care of herself and her kids with that job and so she went back. They not only need safe places, they need to be connected with livable wages.”

Particularly for survivors with little to no work history and/or without a college degree (as well as immigrants) the only available jobs are low paying which does not help them become economically self-sufficient, particularly in relation to paying for housing and child care. As one survivor described:

“I went into further debt and couldn't keep up with rent and utilities while trying to pay or borrow money to pay for education to get a career I could support myself and my children in. I was taking classes and working two jobs and still couldn't keep up paying for child care and all it took to keep things going. There is complete truth to the saying of 'the working poor.'”



COVID Impact

During the pandemic group living situations posed a number of challenges both for safety and ability to work or look for work. One survivor shared that she had to leave her job because the shelter was basically in lockdown and would not let residents come and go, even for work, and her job didn't allow her to work from home.

Domestic Violence and Workforce Development Providers' Needs

Like their clients, domestic violence advocates and workforce development professionals often feel overwhelmed by the complex and varied needs of the survivors they work with, and sometimes lack the appropriate resources or knowledge to respond to them.

Most workforce development professionals have worked in some capacity with clients who have experienced domestic violence, as described by this WFD professional, *"For us, we have cohorts and there is usually one person, typically a female, [who] will identify they have been or are in a DV situation . . . pretty much in every class we have one person experiencing DV."* In fact, of the 35 WFD professionals that were surveyed only 4 respondents said they have never encountered a participant who was dealing with DV. However, in the WFD focus groups there was some discussion related to how they would know if a client was in a DV situation, as it was not commonly asked in any kind of intake process. For example, on the WFD survey 63 percent of participants said they do not ask DV status of clients on intake forms, but interestingly 23 percent were not sure. WFD focus group participants were split on the value of knowing someone's DV status so they could be of better service compared to the value put on privacy and/or "opening a can of worms" for issues they might not know how to deal with.

However, **82 percent of respondents said they received no in-service training for working with participants who had experienced DV.** This was echoed in focus groups where no organizations reported specific training for domestic violence, and only a few participants recalled mentions of domestic violence as a subsection of general trauma-informed training. As a result, *only 11 percent of WFD professionals surveyed felt prepared to assist domestic violence survivors in their workforce/employment needs, with 49 percent feeling only somewhat prepared and 40 percent saying they were not prepared.*

Not surprisingly, most of these professionals feel that DV training would be welcomed professional development so that they could feel better prepared to respond to DV. They also see DV training as something that would benefit the safety of their programs and organizations by equipping staff with knowledge of what to do should DV present a risk of harm. *"We have had a couple incidents where abusers found their way to our place, we needed to make sure she felt safe and that there was someone able to sit down and create a safety plan with her."*

Conversely, domestic violence advocates welcome the idea of having better connections with WFD professionals to help them respond to the many economic and employment needs of survivors that they do not have the capacity to address. Because domestic violence providers are primarily focused on helping clients secure immediate and basic needs, job seeking in particular is an area they do not feel as equipped to handle. For example, when asked where they refer DV survivors for workforce development needs, 56 percent said community-based organizations. However, somewhat troubling was that 47 percent said they refer clients to online job searches such as Indeed or LinkedIn, sites which do not have much personalized information and can be overwhelming, difficult to navigate, and not the most effective way to find a job. Twenty-four percent mentioned state agencies, 17 percent colleges or universities, and 15 percent temp agencies. However, 23 percent of participants said that they do not know where to refer them to at all, showing a real need for knowledge of resources and referrals.

While there is common interest in partnerships, professionals knew of few existing cross-organizational connections beyond knowing the name of an organization that they could refer clients to. The few described were typically dependent on relationships between individuals and personal networks rather than formal organizational partnerships, so when staff transitioned away from their respective organizations, those linkages also ended.

Another key element is geographic proximity given that many survivors do not have transportation access. One existing partnership worked because the DV and WFD organizations were located near each other in the same town, but there simply is not a one-to-one geographic representation of DV and WFD organizations across the Chicago metropolitan area.

Another challenge for staff who worked with immigrant survivors was language access and having culturally competent services for both domestic violence and workforce development. One advocate from a DV organization primarily serving immigrants explained, *“One of the reasons that it is hard to work with others is because of the language barrier, and some workforce places require language fluency which makes it very difficult for our clients to participate in that program.”*

The strength of WFD professionals' support of participants and DV advocates working with survivors are both predicated on one-on-one case management and an emphasis on interpersonal relationship-building. Domestic violence advocates discussed how essential it is to establish foundations of trust, confidentiality, and rapport with their clients who may be emotionally fragile and are reluctant to discuss their situation. Advocates want referrals who are vetted and understand survivors' experiences to help diminish the chances of their clients being passed around and having to retell stories of abuse which can be re-traumatizing. WFD professionals have similar concerns when it comes to knowing where to refer participants experiencing DV—they do not want a hotline number; they want a connection to an organization that they trust can help their participant, and a person to follow up with to make sure clients were getting help.

They also prefer partnerships that would incorporate on-site visits in familiar settings given clients' needs for transportation and trusted relationships.

However, the case management approach also presents challenges to effective partnerships, since the emphasis on one-on-one relationships often means that information is not centralized or shared within or across organizations. One DV advocate shared, *"People are relying on their [own] experiences. For example, my supervisor will have some connections and if it is helpful, she will share. It is more about connections than partnership. We are trying to put together a resource data base, so that everyone can be connected."* This also meant that individual DV advocates were overburdened in needing to know everything as a "one stop shop" for their clients rather than referring them to employment specialists elsewhere (whether within or outside of their organization).

As a result, most DV organizations did not have an employment specialist within their organization because each advocate handled all the needs for a given client, which is a limitation related to advocates' capacity and breadth of knowledge. A meaningful partnership that could help address employment needs would create some space for advocates to better focus on resourcing the immediate DV and basic needs of their clientele. However, there are many challenges that need to be overcome in developing effective partnerships and collaborations to better address the economic needs that are so critical for survivors' long-term safety and stability.

COVID Impact

The pandemic caused severe disruptions to both DV and WFD organizations, from complete shutdown of programs and courses to restrictive shelter policies to trying to move some services online. This made it even more difficult to assist survivors with their economic and employment needs. As one advocate described, *"We used to have a career club that provided mentorship and had employers come and talk to participants, but during the pandemic we couldn't gather. Before COVID there were lots of job fairs and we would send clients there, but the pandemic ended that. Lots of places we can't send them now."* In addition, with schools and daycares closed, survivors who were parents did not have any free/flexible time to take advantage of programs and services because of their caregiving and schooling from home responsibilities.



Recommendations

Throughout our information gathering, participants were asked what they thought would help solve the challenges survivors experienced—either solutions that had worked, or that they believed would work based on their expertise and experience. Not surprisingly, many of the barriers faced by survivors are ones that are faced by many struggling low-paid women. During the current “shecession,” which has had alarming impacts on women—especially Black and Latina/x women—and their families, we have seen the precarious nature of an economic system that has made these women particularly economically vulnerable.

These recommendations, while not exhaustive, arise from the participants themselves—survivors, domestic violence professionals, workforce development practitioners—as well as from Women Employed’s knowledge and advocacy to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity.



Stabilizing Financial Supports

In terms of the challenges identified regarding accessing basic needs, the recommendations necessarily point to concrete solutions—often, financial stop gaps that provide a stabilizing force, allowing for survivors to gain footing while recovering from crisis:

Guaranteed basic income: Building off the successful programs in municipalities across the country, and the pilot program in Chicago, guaranteed basic income would be an acknowledgment of the challenges surfaced throughout this study that made seeking a sustainable income while simultaneously in crisis nearly impossible. The Network launched an Emergency Response Fund in the spring of 2020, responding to the growing need for financial assistance during COVID-19, directly granting funds to survivors to address critical gaps in the social safety net; however, at the time of this report, they had run out of funding for emergency assistance. This mirrors what has happened with FreeFrom’s national emergency Safety Fund which has repeatedly run out of money within hours of opening applications. In 2022, the City of Chicago will distribute emergency funds for survivors of gender-based violence (not just domestic violence), but it has yet to be established how long this type of funding will be sustained, nor what the eligibility criteria will be for use of the funds. To best meet survivor needs, these emergency funds should have a low barrier to access, quickly disseminate funds, and allow for flexible, survivor-driven uses. While these emergency funds are welcome developments, survivors need immediate, flexible financial support—and establishing a permanent guaranteed basic income program would best respond to the complex barriers they face.

Targeted financial support for survivors participating in job training: Stipends while a survivor is participating in job training and credentialing, as well as expanded child care subsidies, could mitigate the costliness of participation; *“There are so many barriers to work. If there could be*

scholarships or subsidies to help the participants pay for living expenses while getting job training that would be so helpful.” One survivor noted how helpful it was that her DV organization paid for her certification for work, but this was unusual rather than a commonly provided support.

Free document replacement: Amending state policy and regulations to allow DV survivors to replace critical identification documents for free; right now, only people born in Illinois who are currently experiencing homelessness or residing in a domestic violence shelter can get a copy of their birth certificate for free.

Transportation stipends: As noted in the findings, transportation barriers rank high on the list of survivors' needs. Transportation stipends can take various forms: gas cards, public transit cards, transportation allowances, etc. but it is important to note that flexibility is key in ensuring survivors can apply stipends towards a range of needs (medical appointments, interviews, child care, court hearings, counseling, etc.).



Increasing Accessibility for Immigrants

Immigrant and particularly undocumented survivors face systemic barriers beyond the scope of many service providers; however, there are promising examples of ways to mitigate those challenges:

Community-based job training programs that serve undocumented people: Many workforce development programs don't serve undocumented people; we recommend expanding eligibility to give undocumented survivors access to these services. One participant noted a successful example of this: *“We have the HANA Center that has training programs for undocumented people or single mothers aged to 45. There is a 6-month [financial] allowance for when they are training there.”*

Making knowledge of workers' and survivors' rights more accessible: As one advocate said, *“Even if you are undocumented, it doesn't mean you don't have workers' rights.”* Study participants recommended that workers' rights—including survivor-specific rights like under VESSA—should be available in multiple languages, and via print as well as through educational workshops. Programs like [Healing to Action's capacity-building services](#) ensure that unions and workers' rights centers are informed about the impacts of gender-based violence and better equipped to advocate for workers who are DV survivors.



Improving Affordability and Access to Child Care

The child care crisis across the country expanded and deepened during the pandemic, but the tenuous nature of the under-resourced system predates COVID-19. The centrality of lack of child care was reinforced in the [Chicago Jobs Council's recent report on Supportive Services](#), in which they noted the limitations of the current child care system for all job seekers, ranging from

cost, location, hours, and more. *Raising Illinois* notes that only one in four infants and toddlers in Illinois can access licensed child care. There have been important improvements in Illinois, with recent relief grants. But the fragility and inadequacy of the system is only magnified when considering the needs of survivors, as evidenced in the findings, and these recommendations augment the need for a significant overhaul:

Hourly, onsite child care options: Child care services located at domestic violence or workforce development providers would be beneficial for when clients need to go on an interview or job-search related task. These options prevent survivors from having to scramble for arrangements for their children.

Child care discounts for survivors: There are promising developments in terms of Illinois' recent expansion of low-cost child care for parents looking for work. But it is not yet clear whether this will meet the needs of survivors looking for work who aren't employed full time.

Non-traditional child care hours: Traditional hours of operation (7 a.m. to 6 p.m.) simply do not meet the needs of parents or guardians working morning, evening, or overnight shifts, or taking classes. Child care providers with more flexible hours are few and far between.



Supports for Job-Seeking

Survivors are often at very different points in seeking employment; for some, they may already have credentials and job history. But as indicated in our findings, many need subsidized employment and the opportunity to build their skills and credentials.

Asynchronous learning opportunities: Because survivors must address multiple urgent needs—that often require navigating onerous legal, medical, and other systems—being able to take “on demand” classes to get credentials or to upskill is important. This would require that education providers maintain virtual programming, even as COVID-19 restrictions may abate. However, virtual services should be in addition to, not a replacement for, in-person services which may be safer and more accessible for survivors who do not have privacy or the necessary technology or digital access.

Shorter job training programs: Because it is challenging to balance the time necessary to learn skills and knowledge with the immediate need of income, participants expressed a desire for job training providers to examine length of programs and provide shorter alternatives.

Knowledge of and access to supportive services: Workforce development professionals both lamented the restrictions to their services and also praised the opportunities that did exist within their programs to provide support. As one workforce development provider shared: “We can [sometimes] provide supportive services through our programs through

federal dollars of WIOA (Workforce Information and Opportunity Act)—so if she is looking for employment but doesn't have transportation to get there, we can supply that. Work clothes and vouchers to go to school, books, we have service dollars to support so if we partner [with a DV provider] we can help them to make sure they can get to programs and back and forth." Clarity about how to access supportive services and shared creative strategies between workforce and domestic violence providers for addressing any limiting regulations would make these important supports more available for survivors.



Domestic Violence-Informed Workplaces

Domestic violence-informed workplaces would allow employers to retain committed employees. There have been local ([Chicago Says No More](#)) and national ([Workplaces Respond](#)) efforts to equip workplaces with policies, best practices, and resources to address the impact of DV. As noted in the introduction, with 25 percent of American women reporting domestic violence at some point in their lives, it is unrealistic to expect the impacts will not come into the workplace. With increasing interest and expectations for employers to advance gender equity in hiring and retention, implementing these policies and practices is necessary.

VESSA education: Human resources departments were should be well-versed in VESSA and even beyond HR, VESSA education should be provided to employment placement specialists, workforce development professionals in general, as well as survivors themselves.

Training for EAP providers: Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are provided by some employers to offer support to employees who may need counseling or other support for personal situations. Employers should screen EAPs for their knowledge and training on domestic violence.

Paid leave to attend court: One recommendation that surfaced was leave policy to provide paid leave and job protection for workers who needed to attend court dates generally, rather than specifically gender-based violence court dates, in order to protect survivor privacy so that they did not have to disclose to their employer the specifics of the situation. Ideally, there would simply be paid leave across the state for workers to be able to utilize. Currently, Illinois does not provide paid sick leave or paid family and medical leave. While Chicago employers are required to provide paid sick time, and domestic violence is an eligible use, it only accrues to 40 hours with very limited carryover. The job protected leave provided by VESSA, then, for most working survivors, is only accessible if they also have paid leave and still requires the disclosure that so many participants shared was prohibitive.



Effective Collaboration between Service Systems

Regardless of whether they worked at domestic violence or workforce development programs, staff consistently shared the belief that collaborations could improve survivors' access to a range of high-quality education and employment opportunities. Building cross-sector partnerships to effectively enhance client services can be challenging when programs have different goals and methods of service delivery. For example, education and job training programs may not be grounded in trauma-informed practices; domestic violence programs may not be aware of the outcome requirements education and job training programs must meet. Overcoming common challenges when building collaborations between domestic violence providers and workforce development programs is critical given that addressing economic needs is essential for survivors' long-term safety and stability.

Cross-training: Training across sectors arose as a common recommendation, and appears important to ensuring effective service delivery. More specifically, training for workforce development practitioners on domestic violence should cover the available services, understand the dynamics of economic abuse, anticipate impacts on job seeking or training, and provide trauma-informed support and referrals. For domestic violence advocates, the lack of knowledge of the breadth of services and supports available via workforce development could be addressed by training, as well as understanding how to address the barriers that shelter rules can sometimes present to workforce attachment. Many domestic violence organizations provide a 40-hour domestic violence training, and Chicago Jobs Council also provides a training for workforce development professionals on providing trauma-informed services. Increasing knowledge, availability, and access to these trainings—and treating it as central to effective service provision—would both be a professional development opportunity for staff and would help them better serve survivors.

Ongoing collaboration: Beyond one-time networking, an ongoing roundtable or other type of coalition, would also ensure that the creative solutions employed by diligent individual professionals could be shared more widely. One possibility would be a roundtable convened by the City of Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services, which funds and supports both domestic violence service providers and workforce development programs. Another would be having an employment specialist from community-based workforce development agencies provide regular visits to DV organizations to provide on-site support.



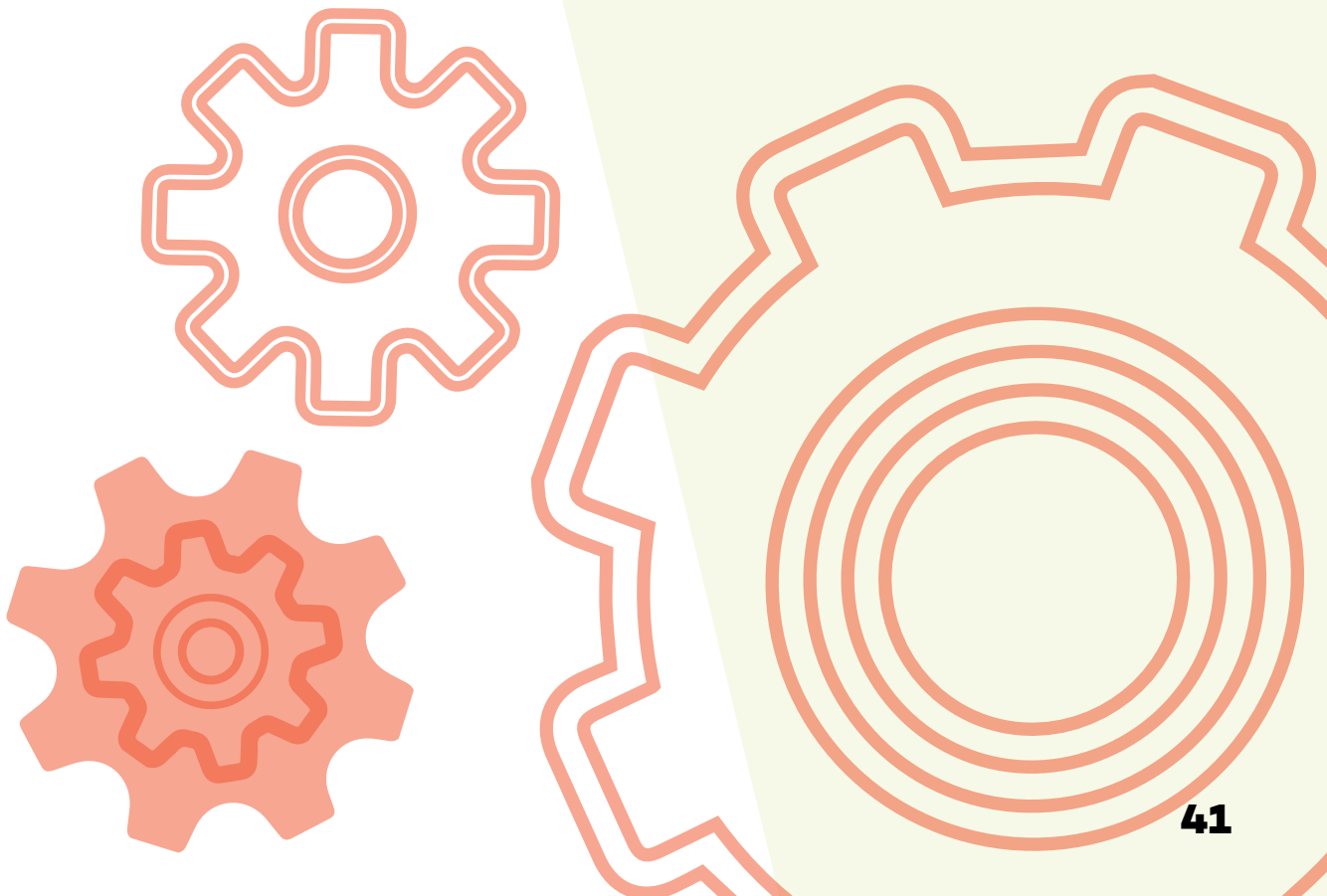
Job Quality

Again and again, we heard that the only jobs that survivors could get lacked the compensation, benefits, and supports to truly become an avenue to economic independence and security. We consider a good job—for any worker—to be a job that offers family-sustaining wages, opportunities for career

advancement, and benefits including health insurance, paid leave, and a retirement plan. A good job should also ensure workers' rights are respected. For survivors, these aspects of a good job make it possible to work, and pave the road to safety and healing. Without adequate wages, child care—and work—becomes impossible. Service sector jobs, which have been hit hard by the pandemic, were also some of the lowest-paying jobs even prior to COVID-some, like restaurant server or nail salon tech, paying a subminimum wage. As has been repeatedly noted, we have the opportunity to build better moving forward. Key recommendations include:

Ensure full and fair wages by ending subminimum wage and enforcing wage theft protections for vulnerable workers: The Department of Labor's statistics on wage and hour violations show that jobs most likely to employ Black and Latina/o/x workers have the highest rates of violations; jobs in these low wage, high violation industries include those that pay less than the minimum wage, with the expectation that tips will make up the difference and if not, employers will close the gap (as legally required to do so). However, wage theft is an overwhelmingly common violation in these industries, and as a result the jobs most accessible to survivors desperate for an income are those that are least reliable in terms of establishing any economic security.

Increase access to paid leave. Illinois should provide paid sick and paid family and medical leave to all working people, and any legislated paid leave proposals should include domestic violence as an eligible use. Providing paid leave to survivors will afford them the opportunity to seek support and access needed services, including finding emergency safe housing.



Conclusion

The findings shared in this report highlight the complex and intersecting nature of issues facing domestic violence survivors in their pursuit of sustainable and meaningful employment, and economic independence. This fits with the existing research which has highlighted the multiple challenges that domestic violence presents for survivors in maintaining employment, minimizing job disruptions, and economic well-being (Adams et al., 2013, Borchers et al., 2016; Showalter & McCloskey, 2020), and the diversity of DV survivors' career needs and employment situations (Chronister et al., 2016).

Our findings reinforce the centrality of child care to survivors' economic situations. As a result of the ongoing pandemic, the vital importance of child care—not just for DV survivors, but for ALL caregivers—is finally being recognized in our society. However, our child care findings also speak to specific research on survivors which has demonstrated that child care subsidies can mediate the role of DV on employment stability (Showalter et al., 2018).

The pandemic has exacerbated financial entanglement by causing increased job loss and unemployment, particularly among women of color, immigrants, and workers without a college education. The Chicago Police Department reported double-digit percentage spikes in domestic violence calls for service. When that is coupled with the dramatic job losses for women—particularly in low-paid jobs in retail or hospitality—survivors of domestic violence are left with even fewer options.

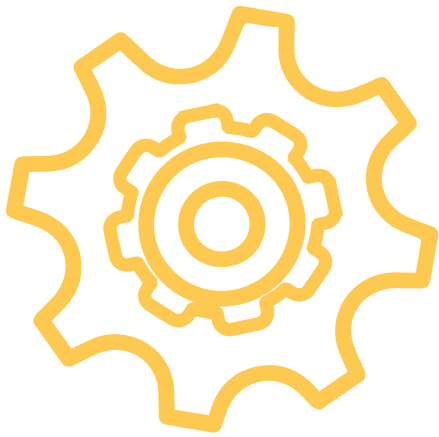
The present study also leads us to wholeheartedly support McGregor et al.'s (2020) conclusion that the relationship between employment and economic well-being for DV survivors is not straightforward and, for some, involves a “trade-off” of benefits and drawbacks. Thus, McGregor et al. warn against “one-size-fits-all” solutions which are unlikely to be effective given the diversity of experiences and situations of survivors. Rather, the solutions must be multi-faceted and intersecting, and involve both smaller scale practice changes at the provider level, and systems and policy advocacy to remove institutionalized barriers. Given that this study represents an action item in Chicago's 2021-2023 Citywide Strategic Plan to Address Gender-Based Violence: *“Partner with Women Employed on a study to better understand how to foster and support employment pathways towards economic independence for domestic violence survivors,”* there exists a framework within which these solutions can be actualized.

Key questions remain: how do we support survivors' journey to economic power when their foundational needs—housing, safety, employment, education, child care, health—are at risk or unmet? How can we shape programming to provide the flexibility and supportive services needed to bridge the gap from crisis to stability?

These recommendations—and these remaining questions—point to the need for an infusion of resources and call upon systems to adapt to the needs of

survivors, rather than asking survivors to make difficult contortions to fit rigid requirements. Rather than intersecting barriers, survivors need interlocking solutions.

We hope the findings of this report, and the recommendations, help to illuminate the journey forward, ensuring that survivors can heal and build their economic independence as they recover and build safer futures for themselves and their families.



Solutions must be multi-faceted and intersecting, and involve both smaller scale practice changes at the provider level, and systems and policy advocacy to remove institutionalized barriers.



Appendix

Methods: Data for this project was collected from survivors, domestic violence advocates, and workforce development professionals in three ways: online surveys, focus groups, and interviews. In total there were six data sources: survivor surveys and interviews, domestic violence advocate surveys and focus groups, and workforce development professional surveys and focus groups.

Survivor Participants: Recruitment for the survivor survey included social media publicity, as well as sharing with local domestic violence and workforce development organizations' staff to pass on to their clients. The survivor survey collected 49 respondents ranging in ages from 25 - 64 with 40.4 percent of respondents falling in the 35 - 44-year-old bracket, as well as interviews with five survivors (see below). Sixty-six percent were currently receiving services from a domestic violence organization (14 different organizations were identified), and 25 percent had received services in the past, only 9 percent of survey respondents had not received services.

Eighty percent of survey participants had children under the age of 18. Forty percent were married or in a domestic partnership, 27 percent were divorced, 18 percent separated, and 13 percent were single/never married. Racial demographics of survey respondents were 70 percent white; 10.7 percent Black or African American; 8.5 percent Asian; 4.3 percent Hispanic or Latina/o/x; 6.4 percent multiracial. For 80 percent of respondents, English was their first language. Seventy percent of respondents were employed, almost evenly split between full time and part time. Fifty-two percent of survivors reported annual incomes less than \$20,000 while 25 percent earned under \$10,000. Forty-nine percent indicated they were the primary breadwinner for their family.

At the end of the survey participants could volunteer to participate in an individual interview with a member of the research team. These interviews lasted 30 - 60 minutes and were held either via phone or Zoom. Individual interviews were conducted with 5 survivors who were recruited via the survivor survey or staff referrals and were compensated with a \$100 gift card for their participation. The age range was between 30 - 65, with a mix of unemployed and employed. Two of the survivors were Black and three were white, two were mothers.

Domestic Violence Advocates and Workforce Development Professionals

Participants: For staff participants, domestic violence and workforce development organizations were invited to partner with Women Employed on this project. Organizations were invited directly from Women Employed's Career Foundations Consortium, The Network (a membership coalition of Chicago-area domestic violence organizations), and WE's existing partnerships as well as via other coalitions and committees. Formal partnership included a stipend in return for distributing surveys to their staff and clients and via external communication channels, as well as committing a minimum of five staff to participate in a focus group. A total of six organizations signed on to these partnerships—Apna Ghar (Our Home) Inc, CAWC, KAN-WIN, Life Span, OAI, Inc., and Sarah's Inn.

Organizations were diverse in their clientele geographically, economically, and culturally (see Appendix). It is worth noting that capacity limitations were the number one reason that organizations declined to become formal partners. However, the survey was also sent out to a broad network of domestic violence and workforce organizations, so staff from other agencies also participated in the survey whether or not their organization was a formal partner.

The domestic violence advocates survey collected 87 responses from 9 different organizations—Life Span, Crisis Center for South Suburbia, Apna Ghar (Our Home) Inc, Sarah's Inn, Family Rescue, Mujeres Latinas en Acción, KAN-WIN, Ascend Justice, Anew—ranging in roles from administrative, to counselors, to legal and court advocates, attorneys, and housing coordinators. The workforce development professionals survey collected 35 responses from staff at 14 different Chicagoland organizations—Central States SER, Centro Romero, Chicago Commons Association, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, Employment and Employer Services, Erie Neighborhood House, Heartland Alliance, Heartland Human Care Services - RICS-Belmont, Jane Addams Resource Corporation, New Moms, North Lawndale Employment Network, OAI, Inc., SERCO, and South Suburban Cook County American Job Center. Their roles ranged from administrative assistant to manager/supervisor, to program director.

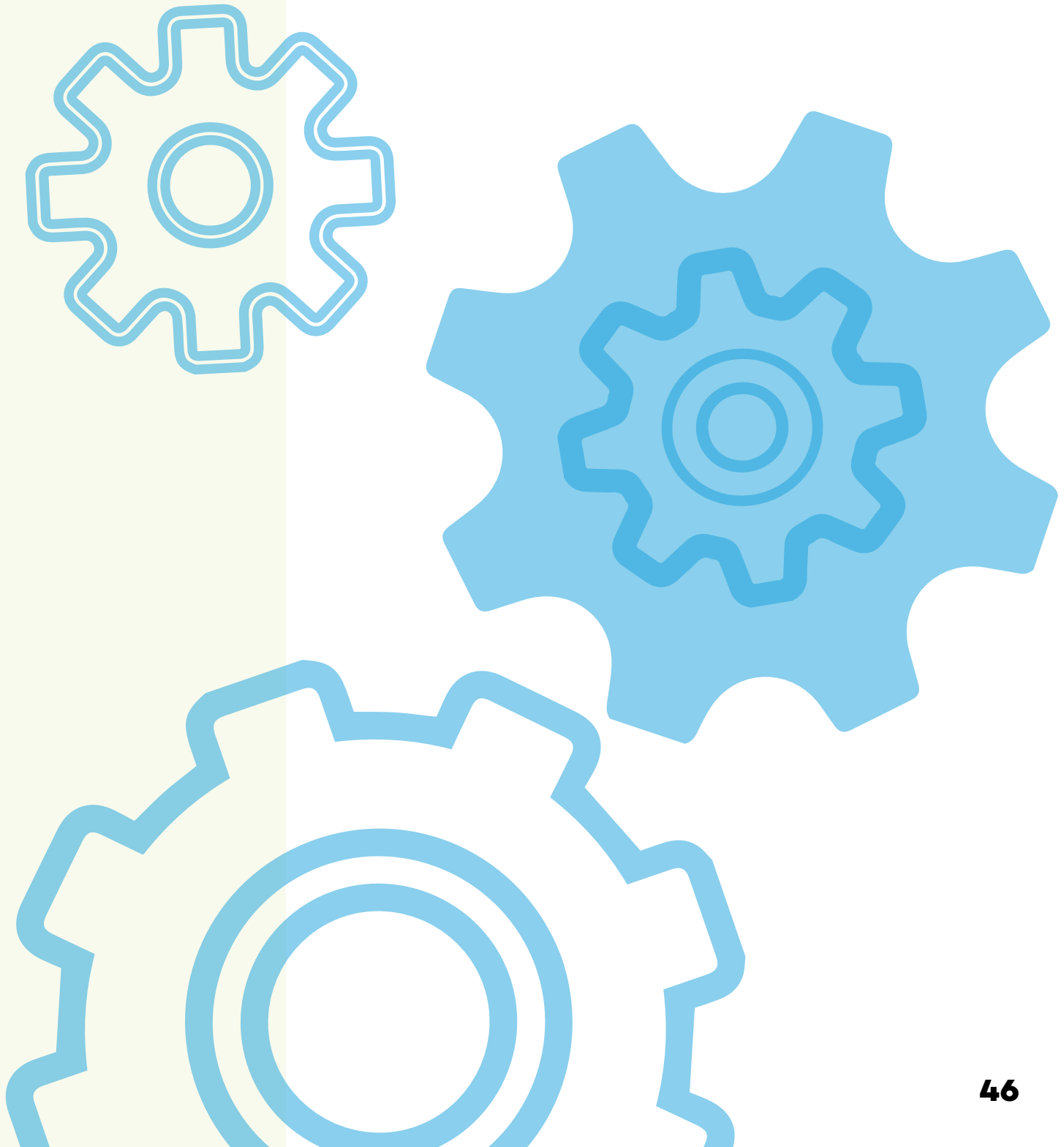
At the end of each survey respondents could volunteer to participate in a focus group. Some focus groups had participants all from the same organization (primarily from our formal partners), but most were composed of staff from different organizations, representing our formal partners as well as other providers. For domestic violence advocates there were 4 focus groups with a total of 28 advocates from 7 different organizations—Apna Ghar, Center on Halsted, CAWC, Crisis Center for South Suburbia, KAN-WIN, Life Span, Sarah's Inn. For workforce development professionals we held 4 focus groups with 15 staff from 7 different organizations—Chicago Commons, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, Employment and Employer Services, Erie Neighborhood House, New Moms, North Lawndale Employment Network, and OAI, Inc.

Limitations: As with any study, this study had limitations. The first is that we initially recruited for the survivor survey on social media, mentioning a gift card incentive to attract participants. However, this attracted hundreds of “bots” who filled out fake responses in the first couple of days of our publicity, which we were able to determine by discovering incomplete, nonsensical, inconsistent, and otherwise questionable answers. As soon as we realized what happened, we took down the social media posts advertising the incentives and removed the invalid responses.

The second limitation was that survivors who filled out the survey did not necessarily match the clientele that our DV advocates and WFD professionals described working with—the survivors responding to the survey were predominantly white, while focus group participants described working with very racially diverse (and often immigrant) populations. Barriers that may be experienced by further underserved populations such as LGBTQ+ survivors and survivors with disabilities, were not specifically self-identified or named by DV

service providers. Additionally, despite providing financial incentives, finding survivors to speak with directly presented a challenge, particularly during a pandemic. Despite these limitations, however, findings were relatively consistent across the survey, focus groups, and interviews and we feel a diverse range of voices was represented in this study because of the multiple data sources.

A final limitation of this study was that we had not asked when abuse had occurred for the survivors who participated in the survey, which could have influenced their responses, particularly related to the priorities of employment compared to immediate needs of recovering from their abuse situation.



Glossary

Abuser: For this report we use the term “abuser” to refer to the person(s) inflicting harm onto a survivor. We are aware that “person who caused harm” or “harm-doer” are other terms which are increasingly used and we also acknowledge that “survivor” and “abuser” are not fixed or mutually exclusive identifications. Colloquially, however, we found that “abuser” was the language used among the survivors and advocates in our surveys and conversations and wanted our report to reflect that.

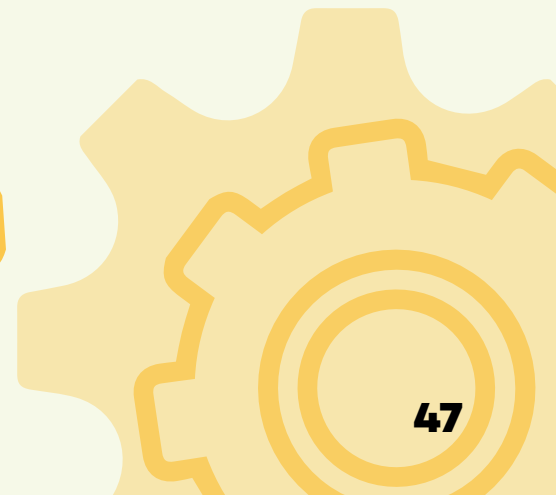
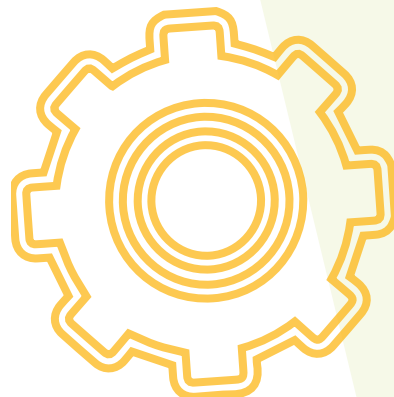
Economic abuse: Can be either restrictive—restricting one’s access to income, financial information, property, or other economic resources—or it can be exploitative—when an abuser coerces, forces, or fraudulently uses a survivor’s money, property, bank account, credit cards, or other resources to their own advantage.

Domestic violence: While in our research we found that “Intimate Partner Violence” or “IPV” was commonly used instead of Domestic Violence, for our report we choose to use “Domestic Violence” as it reflects the most commonly used term among the advocates and survivors who participated in the study.

Per The Network: Domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV) describes a pattern of harmful behavior used by one partner to maintain power and control over another within intimate partnerships. The type of harm that occurs in relationships is not always physical; it can also be emotional, psychological, verbal, financial, economic, social, reproductive, institutional, and health based.

Survivor: While we acknowledge there is not universal consensus on terminology to refer to individuals who have suffered the impacts of domestic violence, we opted for “survivor” given that this was the most common word used by those who participated in our surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The second most commonly used term was “victim.”

Workforce development: Workforce development is used to refer to organizations offer a wide array of services to advance individuals’ employment goals, including but not limited to adult education courses; vocational training; job search services; job placement; financial literacy; career exploration; apprenticeships and internships; and citizenship preparation.



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