

Women In Safe Homes Needs Assessment Executive Summary October 2016

Women In Safe Homes (WISH) is one of 20 Alaska-based domestic violence and sexual assault victim service programs funded by the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA). Incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization in 1978, it currently provides shelter, advocacy, prevention and educational services, primarily to the Ketchikan Gateway Borough region, with support to Metlakatla and Prince of Wales Island.

CDVSA is a state agency that is statutorily mandated to coordinate services for Alaskans affected by domestic violence and sexual assault. They do this through a variety of methods including funding programs for victims and perpetrators, and establishing standards by which programs will operate through regulations and grant award conditions. Based on best practice, CDVSA follows the guiding principles of trauma-informed care for this work. These principles are¹:

- Safety for staff and participants
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support and mutual self-help
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice and choice
- Recognition of cultural, historical and gender issues

Questions related to WISH's operations were brought to light in the summer of 2015 when CDVSA received a variety of concerned phone calls from former and current WISH staff, participants and community members. Issues that were consistently raised throughout these calls were that shelter practices and philosophies no longer aligned with safe shelter standards and trauma-informed care. CDVSA conducted an onsite review in late July 2015, and found WISH to be out of compliance with a significant portion of Alaska's Administrative Code relating to program participant policies, procedures and records, and personnel policies and procedures. CDVSA placed WISH on a probationary status at their public meeting on September 9, 2015, with instructions to WISH to address 9 specific areas of concern. WISH made minimal progress on addressing these concerns, and the probationary status came to the public's attention in January 2016. Since that time, WISH has been inundated with negative media coverage. The majority of Board members resigned between February and July, with the Executive Director tendering her resignation at the beginning of July.

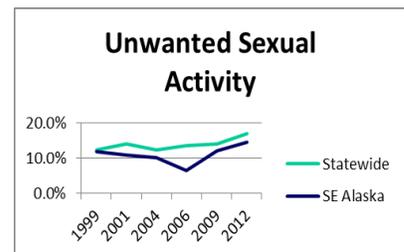
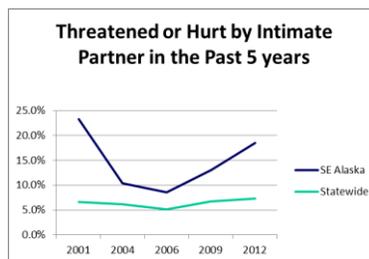
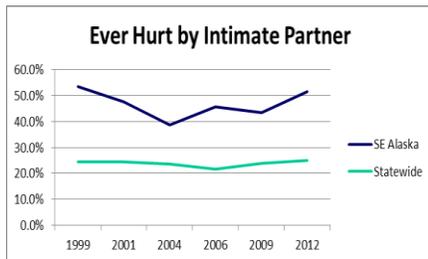
In addition to hiring Katie Tepas as the interim director, WISH retained Jayne Andreen, Collective Change Consulting, to assist in its transition to new leadership. This includes conducting an organizational and community needs assessment to be used in developing a

¹ http://www.samhsa.gov/samhsaNewsLetter/Volume_22_Number_2/trauma_tip/guiding_principles.html

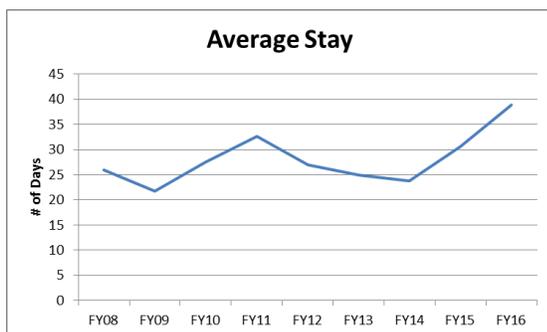
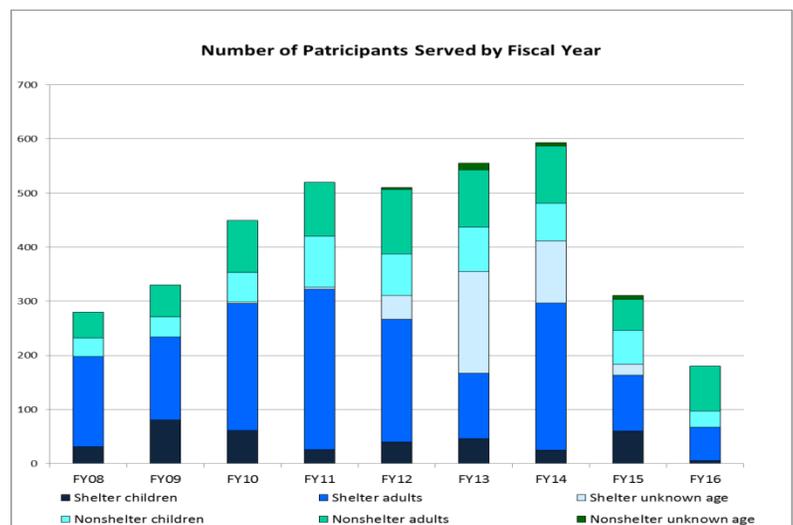
strategic plan. The plan will serve as the basis for identifying the necessary skills, experience and philosophy of the next Executive Director. The assessment was designed in conjunction with a transition team of WISH Board members and a former staff persona and included:

- Compilation of existing demographic, victimization and service utilization data.
- Online surveys and key informant interviews targeting
 - Organizational membership
 - Community partners
 - Organizational staff

Victimization and Utilization Findings



The demographic and victimization data showed the WISH’s catchment area incidence rates of violence and abuse are fairly consistent with state averages. Up until 2014, participant utilization rates were comparable with other Alaskan shelters of similar sizes. Several questions have arisen over the past 15 months related to perceived changes in WISH service philosophy and protocols. This utilization table reflects the number of people served declined between the end of FY14 and FY16 by approximately 70%.



Other questions have arisen related to how focused shelter services are in empowering participants, and avoiding using the shelter to address long-term homelessness. WISH is a 30-day shelter, but has traditionally allowed exceptions when needed. This has changed over the past two years with the average length of stay rising to 39 days.

Findings

The results of the interviews, along with the information that was gathered from the three online surveys, are captured in the following sections of this summary.

Services/Practice

- There is unanimous recognition of the need for WISH's services to remain in the community.
- WISH has strayed from its primary mission of addressing domestic violence and sexual assault, and to the original tenets of trauma-informed care. Many partners expressed the desire to see WISH return to its former philosophy of service delivery.
- WISH needs to refocus its service delivery to recognize the co-occurring nature of violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues. It lacks the staff training and adequate skills, along with clear protocols needed to find the balance for assisting participants with multiple issues in moving toward a safer life.
- WISH changed focus in 2014 with change in leadership with a more traditional behavioral health background. This resulted in the implementation of blacklisting participants with drug and/or alcohol abuse issues, and those recognized as "frequent flyers", people who weren't making enough progress to be allowed back for services.
- Many partners shared their clients who could benefit from WISH were refusing to go because of first-hand experiences and word of mouth information about the unsafe conditions related to physical fights between residents, and substance and alcohol abuse.
- Confidentiality policies don't appear to be clearly understood and/or implemented. Community partners talked about their organizations' release of information forms not honored by WISH, of not being able to talk to or get messages to their clients who were in residence, and of mutual participants not being able to get critically needed information for such things as court proceedings.
- There has been a decrease in working with the participants to promote supportive empowerment. There appears to be little follow-up once someone leaves the shelter, and the number and accessibility of support groups were reported to have declined.
- On a positive note, several community partners discussed the work they are doing with the interim director to rewrite the Memorandums of Understanding, which is addressing such things from above as how confidentiality is handled.

Competencies

- WISH has been experiencing significant levels of staff turnover, resulting in a deficit of needed longevity and well trained staffing. Approximately 67% of WISH's advocacy staff was newly hired between June 2015 and January 2016. More recently, 4 of 15 positions were filled either with new staff or by promoting relatively new advocates into more responsible positions between April 2016 and June 2016.

- When a statewide training and mentoring resource, Patty Bland from the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, left Alaska, WISH lost its core trainer, a function that they haven't replaced.
- Because of CDVSA's probationary requirements, WISH has been actively working to provide staff with the needed training. CDVSA has coordinated training opportunities on trauma-informed care, as well as supporting reverse site and on-site assistance with other shelter programs in Alaska.

Systems and Infrastructure

- Inadequate policies and procedures implementation resulted in several deficits, including insufficient maintenance of participant records, lack of training records and plans, lack of personnel and program evaluation being conducted, and poor grievance procedures that staff was denied the opportunity to access. These practices have led to four legal actions currently taking place.
- Staff may not have been adequately vetted, resulting in inappropriate hires. Position descriptions don't necessarily align with the expected duties, or contain the needed minimum qualifications and skills necessary to successfully complete the work.
- WISH has lacked clear standards and expectations for monitoring and evaluating the organization.
- WISH has been compromised by allegation of nepotism. Family members have been jointly employed, and Board members with close relatives on staff have created a perception of conflict and a lack of objectivity at the very least.
- WISH no longer has a volunteer program.

Culture

- WISH's core values are safety, serving all in need, dignity and respect, strength and healing, and compassion, but these values are not reflected in practice over the past two years.
- The most commonly used phrase throughout the interviews was "chaos", both internally and externally. Revolving directors were brought up, along with WISH's series of "coups" intended, successfully and not, to oust various leaders over the last several years.
- Infighting, disrespecting staff, attacking people's egos, making legal threats if some organizational members come onto the property, and bringing the issues to the media have damaged WISH's reputation.
- A segment of former WISH staff, its membership and part of the community are engaged in a very public dispute, with two basic camps. This adversarial disconnect has damaged WISH's ability to provide effective services to victims.

Community Support/Perspectives

- The strife WISH is dealing with is something that happens far too often in small towns.
- The lack of WISH's timely response to requests for information on WISH operations were identified as contributing factors to why the turmoil has been so extensive.
- WISH decreased its community networking efforts over the past few years, resulting in a breakdown of communication with partners, and withdrawing from networking opportunities.
- Different organizations used to be involved in training WISH staff, but are no longer allowed to do that.

Strengths

Overwhelming recognition was made of the need for services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Responders consistently support the need for WISH to return to its core functions and values. It was recognized by staff and some of the community partners that WISH is beginning to move toward trauma-informed care. Kudos were given for WISH's prevention and family services programs, as well as the commitment of staff and Board members. The partners are looking toward WISH to provide the needed community leadership, and would support the reconvening of the DV and the Promoting Respectful Relationships Task Forces. Rural and outlying community partners are interested in re-establishing and/or initiating collaborative relationships with WISH.

Challenges

Several things were cited as challenges that WISH needs to address in order to move forward. The public nature of the organizational crisis is damaging, and it is important that it be resolved as quickly as possible. Past and current Board and staff members see the CDVSA probationary status as a contributor to the current community perceptions, but community partners didn't reference this as much as they discussed the allegations of wrong doing by community members.

The need to incorporate trauma-informed care into daily practice and the organizational culture will take time. New staff and Board members will need training to assist this process. The lack of a cohesive, empowered staff was identified as needing to be addressed. Shelter safety is critical to ensuring WISH is able to fulfil its mission.

The lack of communication has harmed WISH's reputation and functionality. This, combined with a perception that the organization has "closed" itself to a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach, has decreased people's trust in the organization, and has severed community partnerships.

Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight the themes identified throughout the assessment:

1. Bring in a strong, collaborative leader who is not connected to either side of the current conflict
2. Refocus participant services to establish a safe, supportive environment and approach
3. Improve communications, networking, and community engagement
4. Resolve the conflicts as quickly as possible and focus on the future direction
5. Increase transparency
6. Build organizational capacity for trauma-informed care and administrative functions
7. Work with CDVSA to promote resolution of the probationary status
8. Keep family services and prevention programming
9. Ensure the Board is meeting its roles and responsibilities