



# **MHCD Report for Zonta Club of Denver August 2011**

## **Introduction:**

Growth and Recovery Opportunities for Women (GROW) serves homeless women who have both mental illness and substance use disorders as well as have experienced significant trauma from childhood on into their adult lives. Despite these significant challenges, most of the women we serve want to work and feel that work is an important life goal. To them work represents not only sustenance – a means of providing living expenses – but also identity. Like many of us, they long to be able to tell people not only who they are but where they work and what they do. The development of identity and the fostering of a sense of accomplishment through employment can be crucial to recovery.

MHCD uses the Evidence-based Practice of Supported Employment in assisting consumers with mental health and substance use disorders obtain employment. In this model, employment specialists work with any consumer who expresses an interest to work (no exclusions) and coordinates plans with the treatment team. As soon as the consumer has expressed such an interest, the employment specialist seeks competitive employment opportunities that align with the woman's interests and talents and provides individual, time unlimited support. In some instances, the quest for employment begins with schooling, either certification programs or work towards a GED or bachelor's degree.

MHCD has used the Zonta grant to provide a part-time Education and Employment Specialist (EES) exclusively for the women on the GROW team. The EES, Erin Plonk, has joined the team of women treatment providers to work specifically with this very vulnerable group of women. Because of the extensive nature of their trauma, these women have significant challenges in their quests to work. Perhaps the most significant obstacles are emotional – the feelings of intense fright and vulnerability in new situations and with new people that the woman must overcome in order to attend a class or enter a work setting. These challenges are problematic even at the point of engaging in the process of considering education or work. Having Erin, a woman, consistently available to engage with the women in their job search has been hugely helpful. The women get to know her and work through each step of their education or employment journey with her. She has been able to come and meet with them wherever they are comfortable meeting and then, as trust develops, she actually accompanies them to educational institutions or on job interviews, and can provide job coaching at their work sites. The consistent and individual support she offers makes a big difference. As the EES for the GROW program, Erin was able to connect with 20 different women over the past six months to discuss and work on their educational and/or vocational pursuits.

### **The Successful Process of Returning to School and Employment:**

Here are Erin's own words as she describes how she has helped connect the women to educational opportunities: *"In assisting women in obtaining their education goals, I met with them often times in the community or places they feel most comfortable being and reviewed what they were interested in studying. I would then take them to the school they were interested in so that I could assist them in registering for classes. Currently, **three women have enrolled in classes**. I assisted one woman in learning more about the schools located in Denver that provide American Sign Language (ASL) classes by taking her to see the school and learn about the registration process. I also have two other women who are interested in attending the Emily Griffith Opportunity School to learn trades. We are in the process of exploring more about the school and the programs to meet their needs and interest."*

"Gloria" is one of the women whose life has changed because Erin assisted her in overcoming the challenges of returning to school and ultimately work.

*"Gloria" expressed an intense desire to go back to school and take art classes. Because of the funding provided for us, we were able to meet multiple times to explore art programs around the city. We finally decided that she would enroll in art classes through the Art Students League of Denver. She has stated that she has not felt this excited about her life in a while and she feels that she is on the right track. She has attended several classes and we have enrolled her in more classes for the fall. "Gloria" noted that because of her classes, she is starting to get used to leaving her house more often and thus becoming more social. She expresses that because of this, she feels more confident in returning to the work force. Gloria and I have thus enrolled her with the State of Colorado's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and have started the process of looking for work. She truly has blossomed and because she was able to engage in her artistic passion she has built more confidence that has positively affected other aspects of her life.*

For the women who are interested in pursuing employment, Erin shares her process of assisting them: *"In assisting GROW women in obtaining their vocational goals, I met with them either in the community and was even able to meet them in their homes if they felt more comfortable in that setting. Others were comfortable meeting in our offices so I would meet them there. Once a woman was interested in looking for work, we would meet to complete a vocational assessment so that we could discuss her specific career goals. We would then create a mock application that she could use to apply for jobs as well as create a résumé and any cover letters that were needed. I would also assist the women in enrolling with the State of Colorado's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) which helps individuals with disabilities get bus passes, clothing vouchers and eyeglasses or dental work. Since February, **five women have completed the DVR** intake and are receiving the benefits of enrolling in that program. Two women are halfway through the DVR enrollment process.*

*Another way I would assist the women I met with was to take them out into the community to help them look for places they would like to work, talk with the employers and complete applications. We would also meet to look up potential jobs online and complete any online applications that were required.*

*On my own, I would often go out into the community to job develop and talk with employers about our program and hiring the GROW women. When a woman was offered an interview, we would then practice interview questions and I would often assist them in meeting with their potential employer if they did not feel comfortable doing that alone. Using this process, **three women were hired during the past six months at places in the community, two additional women were granted interviews but were not offered positions, and two women were given temporary jobs through MHCD at its Resource Center.***

“Mary” is one of the GROW women whose life has changed because Erin was there to help her overcome the challenges of returning to work.

*“Mary” has been very active in her search for competitive employment. In the beginning, she and I met to create her résumé, mock application and discuss her career goals. Once we had everything prepared, Mary and I would often go out into the community together to meet with employers, fill out applications and look for places where she would like to work. Because of all our work in meeting with employers, she was granted an interview with Noodles and Company, a local restaurant. Mary and I worked extensively on practicing interview questions and I then accompanied her to meet with the potential employer. She did very well in her interview and was ultimately hired to assist in the kitchen. I would then go visit her at her job to see how she was doing and get feedback from her managers. Mary continued to work at Noodles and Company for 1 month but was ultimately let go because she was not able to keep up with the fast pace. The managers there loved her attitude but didn't feel as if it was the right fit for either her or them. Since this time, Mary and I have continued her job search and she has started a temporary, non-competitive position through MHCD as a donations attendant at the Resource Center. She has successfully completed enrollment with DVR and has been speaking with a manager from Goodwill Industries to inquire about working in their donations department.*

### **The Challenges of Returning to School and Employment:**

It is always difficult to go to school or work when you don't have a safe, affordable, stable place to call home night after night. For the GROW women, this is a challenge. The treatment team works hard to locate housing that will allow each woman to "off-load" this concern and to refocus her energy on education and employment. This is why it is important to have an EES work very closely with the rest of the treatment team. In addition to housing issues, a number of GROW women have children for whom they are responsible. Locating housing and childcare and dealing with mental health, substance use and trauma symptoms all at once can be difficult and overwhelming, like trying to find and fit together the interlocking pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Currently, Denver's job market is tight. Large numbers of people are applying for few openings, especially for unskilled jobs. Although their difficult and disadvantaged histories make them relatively well suited for unskilled jobs, a number of the GROW women are handicapped by previous felony convictions, which in a competitive job market can be especially discouraging for employers. The women easily lose hope because of their felonies and feel as if there are no

jobs available to them. In these very trying times, Erin works to maintain a positive and encouraging outlook and helps the GROW women refocus on their strengths.

Locating an appropriate position is challenging for many of the GROW women. As was true of “Mary,” they may need to try several jobs in order to find one that fits for them. Also, locating employment that provides enough hours at a reasonable wage has been challenging. As a longer term strategy, Erin has worked with a number of the women to capitalize on education and training opportunities that over time increase their opportunities to qualify for more skilled employment.

And finally, each women treated in the GROW program has serious mental health and substance abuse challenges. At times, the job search is temporarily interrupted because the woman Erin is working with suffers a relapse and begins using drugs again or has an encounter with the police and is arrested. The return to past unhelpful behaviors is difficult and can occur even when significant progress is being made on the employment front. When this happens, it is very hard to engage with a woman because she will often miss appointments and become disengaged. Erin has learned, along with the rest of the team, to continue the quest for recovery. She works closely with the clinical team and once the woman is doing better, Erin quickly re-engages with her to continue vocational services.

We are so grateful to the Zonta Club of Denver for recognizing and funding this important work. Thank you for making a difference in the lives of the GROW women!

Respectfully,

Kristi Mock, MSW, LCSW  
MHCD Adult Services Director