

## **Ohio Women of Color Caucus Call to Action Statement: Taking Actions to Break Through Barriers**

The Ohio Women of Color Caucus (WOCC) is a diverse collective of professional and grassroots advocates that self-identify as Women of Color.\* The WOCC is co-coordinated by the [Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence](#), and the [Ohio Domestic Violence Network](#). We are dedicated to addressing the needs of and empowering communities of color through education, while supporting the growth and leadership of Women of Color advocates and allied professionals.

At the *Breaking Through Barriers* conference held on June 25-26, 2014 sponsored by the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, and the Ohio Department of Health, we were thrilled to have the conference include a necessary panel discussion which focused on developing and supporting Women of Color leadership in the violence against women movement. For the first time in Ohio, our own unique professional needs and concerns were addressed at a statewide conference. This WOCC Call to Action statement is our way of honoring and addressing the important work the conference started in Ohio as we continue building momentum and motivation. We outline below, what we learned from the conference plenary and workshop facilitators, the Women of Color and aspiring ally panel, and our WOCC conversations that led to this Call to Action to further this work of breaking through barriers to leadership and resources for communities of color.

Sumayya Coleman of Share Time Wisely Consulting Services located in Maryland, opened the panel discussion that invited local and national advocates to share their individual work that supports local, statewide, and national programs in the anti-gender violence movement. Ms. Coleman guided the 85 conference participants to experience the panel with the shared agreement of looking at the need for *creating equity across programs, systems, and communities*. The purpose of the panel was to share the real experiences of many Women of Color across the national anti-gender violence movement. The objective was to begin an open conversation that would lead Ohio to develop concrete statewide actions toward organizational cultural change in our anti-violence organizations to share privilege, power, and leadership. This approach would demonstrate a

\*A Woman of Color is defined as any women who self-identifies as Asian/Pacific Islander, Arab/Middle Eastern, Black/African American/Caribbean/West Indies, Native/Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latin descent.

strong commitment to intentionally develop our leadership and build capacity to reach communities of color.

India Harris-Jones from the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, moderated the panel of four women: Sumayya Coleman, Teresa Stafford of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center, Julie Broadwell of the SAAFE Center, and Lynn Peters from HarborCOV in Maryland. The panelists helped participants identify and understand how particular biases lay the groundwork for discrimination and reinforce dominant culture within our organizations. In addition, the panel identified how White aspiring allies can use their privilege to affect change.

### **Key Points From Women of Color panelists:**

- Aspiring Allies can effectively mentor Women of Color and give them access to leadership positions. In doing so be careful not to tokenize and isolate employees for diverse characteristics. For example, don't rely on Women of Color to **only** advocate on behalf of other Women of Color. All advocates within in an agency should be able to provide advocacy for all clients.
- Having Women of Color on staff increases the agency's ability to effectively advocate for all survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Across the country the survivors of the untested rape kit initiative are predominately African-American women. Women of Color are sexually assaulted at a higher rate than their counterparts.
- By bringing together individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, we broaden the client base we serve. Diversity fosters a more creative and innovative agency.
- WOC leadership is important to developing culturally relevant programs in OH that will reach women of color victims with language and advocacy that speaks to communities of color and meets their needs. **Example:** Programs could reach WOC at hair salons, spas, childcare centers, universities, and colleges, faith-communities by using brochures and palm cards that reflect their unique cultures.
- Accountability is demonstrated by thinking through specific challenges that women of color leaders, and victims, experience and the information both of them are able to share. Then show respect by working concretely for systemic change. **Example:** Both WOC advocate leaders and victim/survivors are in rather precarious situations where their livelihood is reliant upon mainstream program

structures. Though they sit on opposite sides of the table as employee versus client they remain marginalized by systems of privilege. Aspiring Allies are in a position to change this dynamic by thinking through policies and practices that keep WOC in positions of dependence and powerlessness. Aspiring Allies can take concrete steps to develop processes to listen to them, assess for necessary areas of organizational structural and cultural change, and share leadership status in OH.

- It is important for the conference participants to return to their programs to have conversations about the analysis and disparities they learned about, how to use the information, to follow the leaders here who strongly support women of color leadership, and be intentional about creating systemic change. **Example:** Executive and program directors could be intentional about staying connected to the information shared at the conference. This could lead to a developing a transparent statewide strategy between domestic and sexual violence coalitions and local programs over a specified period. Look at the racial and ethnic disparities in leadership and staffing. Seek to understand why WOC victims/survivors do not use your services and the impact of violence on them as a result. Identify strong Aspiring Allies nationally and get support from them to change systems that hinder WOC advocates' mobility, and victims' and survivors' safety.

### **Key points from White aspiring allies panelists:**

- For those in a position to do so, review your agencies job descriptions/requirements and see if you MUST have a Bachelor's degree, a licensure, or a certain number of years of experience, etc. If possible, amend descriptions so that Women of Color with real life experience can apply and be hired. Depending on the structure of your organization and the available positions, consider making several part-time jobs out of a full-time job, which then doesn't require a Bachelor's degree. This might enable you to hire more WOC.
- For anyone in any position at an agency/program, ask to have anti-oppression/diversity as an agenda item at each staff meeting/group supervision. When it is on the agenda EACH time, it gets discussed and stays at the forefront of everyone's mind. An example is to have discussions around films that everyone is required to view, such as the films *Rape on the Reservation* or *Making Whiteness Visible* (Staff can view on work time). Also, utilize the discussion guides that come with some films to have focused conversations after viewing.

- For everyone, be proud and be deliberate that your agency/program is seeking Women of Color as volunteers and staff. **Talk about it, encourage it, create an environment where Women of Color know that they are welcomed, and will be supported by ALL staff, not just the manager.**
- As a resource, take guidance from the (attached handout) with tips on how to be an Aspiring White Ally.

This panel discussion and the conference as a whole, is a catalyst for a new beginning in Ohio. It revealed that Women of Color have been largely unrecognized and underdeveloped, and communities of color have been underserved. We want to continue what the conference and the panel discussion began by urging programs across Ohio to continue to explore how attitudes, stereotypes, and other hidden biases influence perception, judgment, and actions that prevent marginalized communities from reaching out for help from local programs. We want to help create organizations whose practices are aligned with values and a movement that is diverse and inclusive. White aspiring allies, have a privileged position to move this work towards those ideals. As OAESV Board member Sharlene Boltz, said in her opening remarks for the panel, "Time is up!" Now is the time for change!

### **The Women of Color Caucus Statewide Call to Action for Ohio's Sexual and Domestic Violence Programs:**

- Recognize that addressing and ensuring the unique needs of Women of Color and their communities is important to ending violence against women.
- Have continual conversations about Women of Color leadership in the Ohio violence against women movement during staff meetings, board, and professional development opportunities.
- Support Women of Color staff, board members, volunteers and other allied professionals with respect for their thoughts and actions.
- Encourage Women of Color staff, board members, volunteers and other allied professionals to join the Women of Color Caucus. Support their active participation in the caucus in concrete ways.
- Apply for funding that will support developing the Women of Color Caucus, Women of Color staff in local programs, and leadership development.

- Incorporate the Women of Color Caucus members in setting legislative agendas by recognizing their expertise, perspectives, and experiences with communities of color.
- Make opportunities for the Women of Color Caucus to share in Board of Director activities that will allow them to serve on the Board.
- Make opportunities for the Women of Color Caucus to plan and implement culturally specific awareness-raising and educational events statewide.
- Know that Women of Color are intelligent, competent, hardworking, valuable members of your community and within your agency.
- Make space to hear Women of Color respectfully challenge you on your position or actions, as they are doing so for REAL AND VALID reasons.
- Listen to their concerns, trust and support their leadership to make real changes that are fair and just to make this a better movement for all women.
- Treat Women of Color with dignity, fairness, and respect by including them at decision-making tables, and management positions.

We believe these actions, if done with a conscious effort and desire for change, can begin to create the transformation necessary in our movement so that Women of Color are supported and communities of color receive access to quality services.

The violence against women movement must recognize everyone's passion, everyone's unique perspectives, and everyone's value. The Women of Color Caucus is declaring our place in this movement.

Respectfully submitted,

The Ohio Women of Color Caucus