Celebrating 10 Years of providing vital mental health care for women regardless of ability to pay


862 ⚫ 3774

# of women we provided services for in our first full year of existence

# of women we provided services for in 2016

... THAT’S A 438% INCREASE. YOUR SUPPORT HAS HELPED US BECOME THE SECOND LARGEST PROVIDER OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN OUR AREA SINCE OPENING OUR DOORS IN 2007. THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION TO PROVIDE WOMEN WITH EFFECTIVE COUNSELING, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND EDUCATION SO THAT THEY CAN TRANSFORM LIFE CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE AND GROWTH.

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The Women’s Initiative celebrated women’s stories of healing at the Challenge into Change ceremony. See more photos from the event, p. 5.
10 Years of Supporting Women’s Healing
A Message From the Executive Director

Dear Friends:

This year The Women’s Initiative marks 10 years of providing vital mental health care for women in our community and we have much to celebrate! We spent the winter under construction at our anchor location at 1101 East High Street, and are proud to unveil expanded space that will enable us to serve more women in need.

Senator R. Creigh Deeds, the leading mental health advocate in the Virginia General Assembly, helps us celebrate the expansion with a ribbon-cutting and tour of the space Monday, May 22, 3:30–5 pm.

The Women’s Initiative has always recognized the connection between physical and mental health and the impact of trauma on women’s lives and wellbeing. Our new space includes a large group room that will allow us to do more mind-body work, such as yoga (see page 3 for an example of one of our yoga programs). The larger room also enables us to receive clinical training from experts, such as the trauma treatment approach we are learning with Elizabeth Smiley, PhD, LPC (see below).

Accessible. Affordable. Effective. The Women’s Initiative is a unique healing environment that recognizes the inherent strength and resilience that is found within each of us. As one client shared: “I could not have afforded the service that was very much needed. I have been able to move forward with different issues where I might still be stuck in a repeating loop. I am extremely grateful for the compassionate and very helpful care. Thank you to all who make it possible.”

The only way that we can support women’s healing and recovery is with your partnership. Thank you for investing in the health of our community. I look forward to all we will accomplish together in the next 10 years!

With love and gratitude,

Elizabeth Irvin, LCSW
Executive Director

Over the past 10 years we have continued to improve our capacity to treat underlying trauma that is at the root of our clients’ symptoms and challenges. We use a variety of evidence-based therapeutic approaches to meet each woman’s unique needs. We benefit from the expertise of community clinicians to expand our therapists’ training and continue our tradition of clinical excellence. Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a mental health treatment approach that helps women heal all forms of trauma.

Elizabeth Smiley, PhD, LPC, has been working in private practice in Charlottesville since 1998. She received her doctorate at UVA and now practices primarily from an IFS perspective. Smiley taught the IFS model of psychotherapy to our clinical team in the summer of 2016. Since then, she has been volunteering monthly to provide clinical consultation to therapists incorporating this modality into their practice at The Women’s Initiative.

Why did you want to volunteer for The Women’s Initiative?
After a decade focused primarily on my own practice, I’ve been looking for a way to step back into community service. I’ve also missed the clinical training role I played earlier in my career. The invitation to provide IFS training and consultation to TWI clinical staff has been a terrific opportunity to contribute, but it’s been a gift to me as well.

Tell us about Internal Family Systems (IFS).
I think Internal Family Systems Therapy is both elegantly simple and powerfully transformative. Richard Schwartz has developed and refined the model over years of observing how we instinctively experience ourselves as more than a single entity. IFS normalizes this natural multiplicity of mind and furthermore, trusts in the innate healing powers at the core of every one of us. As an IFS therapist my role is to safely and respectfully guide clients inward, where they can access those core resources and use them to heal from the inside out in deeply personal, meaningful ways.

How do you think IFS fits into the therapeutic work of TWI?
The Women’s Initiative is interested in empowering women, and it would only make sense that the clinicians would like to use therapeutic modalities that erase the more traditional power differential between therapist and client. What appeals to clinicians who are studying this with me is that it allows clients to use their own language—it respects in an essential way that clients have an interior life that they already know a lot about, and they can tap into that interior life in order to grow and heal.
A new program at The Women’s Initiative is creating safe spaces for black women and women of color to heal from trauma, develop coping strategies, ease emotional stress, and decrease isolation.

The Sister Circle Program is an affinity-based set of groups and offerings that unburden participants from having to navigate the forces of marginalization and oppression while they are working on healing.

The Women’s Initiative sees every client’s cultural background as a central factor in her health and well-being; in therapeutic terms, this is called “culturally responsive care.” For women of color, this means understanding that the experience of racism is a trauma. An important part of healing from that trauma—as with any trauma—is being in a safe space free of the threat of retraumatization.

In a clinical support group led by Program Director Eboni Bugg, LCSW, and therapist Shelly Wood, MSW, both of whom are African American, black women can process difficult feelings and form friendships. In a monthly West African dance group in conjunction with Chihamba, women of color use movement to explore the stories of their African heritage. And in a West African cooking class, women of color learn healthy recipes and techniques inspired by their ancestors. In each of these offerings, the guiding principle is to create a place of safety and welcome to women of color, many of whom have had no previous experience of therapy or a therapeutic space.

When the Sister Circle support group began in October 2015, there was a resounding response—25 people attended the first session. Now, dozens of people attend these weekly and monthly offerings.

Supporting African American therapists is also crucial to creating a sense of welcome to women who may not have previously seen themselves reflected in a mental health provider before; nationally, about 90 percent of mental health professionals are white.

“Representation matters,” Bugg says. “When you see yourself reflected in the community of healing, you feel more invested in that.”

With that in mind, Bugg is creating a network of mental health providers of color in Charlottesville, and The Women’s Initiative is prioritizing training diverse clinicians.
Emotional Support for Domestic Violence Victims

Trauma-informed care in collaboration with Shelter for Help in Emergency

A new collaboration between The Women’s Initiative (TWI) and the Shelter for Help in Emergency (SHE) is providing trauma-informed mental health care to victims of domestic violence.

“We went to the experts in the community who are well positioned to provide this service,” said SHE Executive Director Cartie Lominack. “It’s about trying to take care of women’s mental health and wellness—helping women become stronger and more self-confident, helping them get to a place where they feel better able to handle the things that lie ahead of them as they navigate that future.”

The Women’s Initiative and the Shelter for Help in Emergency have long been community partners, providing referral and support to one another’s clients. Now, a TWI therapist is staffed in-house at the SHE residential facility to provide trauma-informed mental health counseling to the women who are staying there. A therapist from ReadyKids provides the service for children. Both positions are funded by a grant from the Victims of Crime Act through the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services.

For The Women’s Initiative, the collaboration is a natural extension of the mission to help women turn life challenges into opportunities for change and growth. For the Shelter for Help in Emergency, it is a chance to provide extra support for clients who are working to ensure that their—and their children’s—basic needs are met. Women who may otherwise not be interested in attending therapy feel safe getting help from a therapist whose presence in the residential facility reduces the stigma around mental health care and takes away the barriers to access.

“The reason we’re doing this is to eliminate the barriers that are standing in the way of people getting services—not having time, being on a waitlist, transportation,” Lominack said.

The TWI therapist works in tandem with other staff at the residential facility to provide skills and support for whatever is going on in the women’s lives: for instance, teaching clients relaxation techniques to help reduce anxiety around a job interview or facing an abuser in court.

“It’s been a beautiful thing to see,” said Robin Jackson, Legal Advocate and Outreach Counselor at SHE. “It speaks volumes about the need that is there for folks to talk about things.”

Thank You for Making 2017 Girls’ Night Out a Success!

Your support makes our work possible

The Women’s Initiative would like to thank the Girls’ Night Out committee for making this year’s event a tremendous success! On Tuesday, May 2 nearly 200 women gathered to raise both awareness and critical funding in support of our mission. In addition to lively conversation with friends and delicious fare, this event featured a gorgeous silent auction with paintings from 19 celebrated artists.

Event co-chair Ginger Graham shared these important words, “Women are the foundation upon which happy and healthy families are built. Collectively, we provide the scaffolding upon which we construct functional and prosperous societies. By supporting women during times of challenge, we support her entire family, her neighborhood, our broader community, even ourselves.”

Funds raised will help us bring vital mental health services to more than 3,500 women in 2017. We thank all who attended for believing in our mission & the ability of our programming to save lives. A special thank you to Signature Family Wealth Advisors for increasing their sponsorship in recognition of our 10-year anniversary and making this event possible.
The Women’s Initiative celebrated women’s stories of healing at the 2017 Festival of the Book on March 22. Above, from left: Challenge into Change Third Place Winner Becca Pizmoht; feature author Seema Reza; Program Director Eboni Bugg, LCSW; Second Place Winner Kaity L. Yang; and First Place Winner Aerial Perkins. Right: Authors at a reception held in their honor. Photographs by Elyse Smith.

Thank you to the Challenge into Change Committee! Tonia Alexander ♥ Katelyn Durkin ♥ Kathleen Ford ♥ Meg Handelsman ♥ Nancy Summers

Excerpts from the Winning Entries

From “Pretty Brown Girl,” by Aerial Perkins
First Place Winner

“...The natural light coming through the stunning wooden windows gave the studio good vibes. I place my colorful yoga mat on the floor and watch beautiful women of color fill the space. The sense of belonging overwhelmed me as we flowed through the vinyasa sequence. As I take warrior two pose I begin to reflect over the years where I felt angry, sad and weak because of what I believe to be a deformity. My brown skin was the target of relentless bullying. Now my brown skin is complimented more often. I see women like Lupita Nyong’o, Michelle Obama, my yoga teacher, and my mom and realize that the essence of my beauty is not just my smile, my brown eyes, or my hair...it is the self-confidence on the inside that generates beauty. I am a pretty brown girl.”

From “Chronic Guest,” by Kaity L. Yang
Second Place Winner

“... As I vacuumed away self-hatred And cast open rusty windows, encrusted with salt. Fresh air Poured in like concrete. Welcome back, little light I Am loved. And I have value. I Am worthy. I Am my own. To have and to hold. I Am worthy. I Am proud of this house. This body. This face. This mind. I Am worthy. ...

All entries to the Challenge into Change contest are published in a book. To purchase your copy, visit thewomensinitiative.org/change

From “Alive,” by Becca Pizmoht
Third Place Winner

“...I kept running. Slowly. Gone are my 7:30 miles, for now I’m content with 9 minute miles and it’s ok. Just hearing my feet hit the pavement reassures me that I’m alive. I pushed to start radiation, the next phase of treatment so that I can have as much billed to my insurance this year. The drive is maddening and takes a big block of the day. I still strive to have a normal day, to get up and feed the animals and go to work. The shadow that is cancer is there but it won’t darken my day. I am alive.”

Challenge into Change: Stories of Healing

Contest draws 86 testimonies to women’s capacity to heal

Challenge into Change is a forum for real-life stories about women overcoming personal struggles. In the fall of 2016, The Women’s Initiative invited Central Virginians to submit a poem or essay of 500 words or less about a woman (themselves or someone they knew) who had surmounted a difficult situation in her life. Eighty-six writers responded to our call.

Challenge into Change began in 2008 as a celebration of The Women’s Initiative’s first year of providing vital mental health services to women regardless of ability to pay. Since then, it has become a venue for veteran and emerging writers alike to showcase their talents and engage in creative exploration. As The Women’s Initiative marks its tenth year, we share with you these excerpts from our three winners as a testament to what lies at the heart of our agency’s vision: women’s capacity for healing.
Thank you to our Board!

We are so grateful for your commitment to women’s mental health as a cornerstone of our community’s overall well-being

‘The Women’s Initiative helped me through a crisis’
Words of gratitude from those we serve

“The Women’s Initiative helped me through crisis. I got the help I needed at the time and am extremely grateful for all the services I received.”

—2017 Client

“These therapy sessions definitely helped me through my depression and having someone to talk to finally after not being able to afford a therapist made a big difference.”

—2017 Client

“This program inspired and moved me, motivated me to write and hopefully participate in the future.”

—Attendee of Challenge into Change Ceremony at the 2017 Festival of the Book