

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR 2021

*“The pandemic left me crying and feeling lonely and depressed sometimes, but this group reminded me that I am not alone... The fellowship and camaraderie I felt in the group alleviated those feelings of despair with laughter and friendship.”*

*– NYWC group participant*

It was a year like no other. The global COVID-19 pandemic presented us with new challenges – as a society, as an organization, and as individuals.

The pandemic exposed stark inequalities in our society. It exacerbated poor social and economic conditions in communities that were hurting even before the pandemic struck, with the greatest impact to women within those communities. We heard from women struggling to cope in their everyday lives, facing challenges with their families, jobs and personal well-being, all while navigating a public health emergency. We also heard their stories of strength, resilience, empathy and hope. These stories inspired and lit a fire within us. They encouraged us to keep working together, to think outside the box, to take the actions necessary to ensure that women could continue to rely on NYWC in their time of need, as they’ve been doing for over 30 years.

Safety and accessibility were our top priorities. To protect the health and well-being of our team and program participants, and to help limit the spread of the virus, we closed our doors to in-person services and adapted to working remotely. Then we focused on new ways to safely address the needs of women who needed our support. Our dedicated program team transitioned almost immediately to providing help by telephone, text message and videoconferencing. They also donned masks to visit clients in their homes or meet them in outdoor public spaces when weather and public-health guidelines permitted.

We were unwavering in our determination to continue delivering on NYWC’s mission. We rebuilt the curriculum of our flagship Women’s Empowerment Series so that it could be delivered virtually with the support of a team of program facilitators. They were themselves learning how to facilitate virtually, with the help of former clients who generously agreed to serve as test participants. It was their way of paying it forward and ensuring that the program that had helped them when they needed it most was available to other women.

NYWC also identified a pressing need to support the mental health of women who were isolated in their homes due to the lockdown measures. We developed the Virtual Women’s

Lounge drop-in program to create an online community of mutual support, social connections and belonging. Offered weekly and then twice per week, we operated the Lounge daily in the last two weeks of December 2020, recognizing that many of the participants were spending the holiday season alone for the first time.

Our move to virtual programming exposed a significant barrier to access for women who struggle with the double burden of social and digital exclusion. These women have few social supports, are less likely to use the internet, face barriers accessing devices and network connectivity, and often lack the skills to use technology to get their needs met. That insight spurred the creation of our Tech-Savvy Empowered Older Women program, through which we provided free mobile devices, network connectivity and digital literacy training to home-bound senior women, many of whom had never used the internet before.

None of the above would have been possible without the generous support of our funders and donors, many of whom reached deep to give more than they had traditionally. That kind-hearted generosity gave us reassurance that we could forge ahead and do what we needed to do while maintaining a healthy balance sheet.

We could not be prouder of the people that make up NYWC and what they have accomplished over the last year. We are proud of our program team who learned new skills and ways of working with each other so that they could continue to support our program participants and the community. We are proud of our supporters who stuck by us despite the challenges and uncertainty of a global pandemic. We are proud of our board members who continued to steward the organization with judicious foresight and sound decision-making. Together they inspired, energized and empowered us all.

Elissa Podolsky  
Chair, Board of Directors

Iris Fabbro  
Executive Director