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Vista Maria to open state's only 'secure' site for young human trafficking victims

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- New Dearborn Heights center will provide counseling, secured facility to help rehabilitate young victims
- 50 percent or more of minors recovered by law enforcement return to traffickers
- More secure sites needed to break the cycle, law enforcement officials say



Vista Maria

Angela Aufdemberge, president and CEO of Vista Maria, stands in front of the new secure treatment site the nonprofit will open in May.

Sally, a human trafficking victim, had a place she called home in Washtenaw County, but it really wasn't.

There were no hot dinners, homework help or happy family times. Her mom was too busy catering to a boyfriend to spend time with her daughter.

Soon, Sally found a new family. She'd run away every time police officers brought her back home.

She was raped, introduced to drugs and cycled in and out of shelters and hospitals for overdose and psychiatric treatment because she was suicidal, beginning at the age of 12.

Sally — whose name was changed to protect her identity — felt more at home on the streets. She always made her way back to her "boyfriend," who provided her with both a fix and a sense of family.

The last time she left home, she was 14 years old. She overdosed, and after her mother refused to pick her up from the hospital, she wound up at Vista Maria, which provides residential treatment and schooling for girls in need from its Dearborn Heights campus.

It took time, but Sally gradually opened up about what happened to her.

Her boyfriend would say things like, "If you loved me, you'll do this for me," said Meredith Reese, chief of integrated behavioral health at Vista Maria.

Or he'd tell her that to get more drugs, she needed to provide sexual favors, Reese said.

"He knew he had her." In May, Vista Maria will open Michigan's first "secure" treatment site for young, female victims of human trafficking to ensure "boys" like him can't get to girls like Sally to pull them back into a life of trafficking.

The new, 14,000-square-foot center in Dearborn Heights represents a new treatment model for human trafficking victims, combining emergency health and mental health at a trauma-focused center so victims don't have to jump between hospitals, police stations and residential treatment sites. It doubles the number of dedicated beds Vista Maria has for victims of human trafficking, building on an open center unveiled on its campus five years ago for girls who

are stable enough to come and go from the campus for school, jobs or outings.

Vista Maria has hired 26 new employees to provide treatment at the new facility.

Vista Maria, which is operating on a \$25 million annual budget, has raised about two-thirds of the \$4.9 million cost of the new Aaron and Helen L. DeRoy Freedom Center. Lead gifts in the campaign include \$750,000 from the DeRoy Testamentary Foundation, \$500,000 each from the Carls Foundation and McGregor Fund and a 15-year, forgivable loan from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Indianapolis.

"This new building enables us to take young people right from a raid situation ... and stabilize them physically and mentally," at the same location, Vista Maria President and CEO Angela Aufdemberge said.

"It's a physical intervention — we're pulling her out and putting her in new place to calm the effects of that trauma," Aufdemberge said.

Developing that relationship is essential to breaking the cycle of a girl looking to return to her trafficker because of the hold he or she has on her, Aufdemberge said.

Physical security features at the new center, including locks, cameras and alarms, will also play a vital role in helping to reduce recidivism, law enforcement officials said.

Investigations confirm that over half of the girls who are exploited return to their

trafficking "families," said Mike Glennon, supervisory special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigations, which leads the Southeast Michigan Traffic and Exploitation Crimes multi-jurisdictional task force.

But based on social media postings and other investigation, recidivism is projected to be as high as 80 percent, he said.

"With a recidivism rate that is astronomically high ... the vast majority just can't get out of the life cycle they're in. The only way to break the chains ... is to put them in a secure facility and get them the help they need."

Vista Maria's new center, the only secure treatment site for young trafficking victims in the state, can provide residential treatment for 16 girls.

But with at least half of roughly 250 minor victims recovered last year expected to go back to their traffickers, that's nowhere near enough, Glennon said.

By the numbers

The COVID-19 pandemic and Michigan's stay-home and shutdown orders have not shut down human trafficking.



Law enforcement officials track online advertisements to get an idea of activity levels, said Detective Lieutenant Edward Price, the Detroit-based assistant commander, District Special Investigation Section, Michigan State Police. It's impossible to determine how many ads are posted by individual traffickers, as some post several ads.

"It's the easiest way for us to look at it without being out doing undercover stings," Price said.

Between March 1 and 12, there were about 600 ads per day posted online on classified and escort service listings for Michigan, Price said. Between March 16 and 24, it rose to about 850 ads per day. For that roughly three-week period of March, there were 14,000 online ads.

Activity has decreased some over the past month but continued. During the first three weeks of April, there were 9,107 online advertisements, Price said.

"You just don't know how many victims are attached to the advertisements," he said.

Michigan has been identified as both a recruitment and destination state,

Glennon said. It's got a high rate of occurrences, with people traveling into Michigan or within it to sexually exploit people and a higher number of younger girls being enticed into the lifestyle than many other states. On average, Michigan ranks as the 10th highest state in the country for sex trafficking.

There are likely thousands of trafficking victims around the state, Glennon said. But since many are adults who can make independent decisions about engaging in prostitution and other illegal activities, it's tough to identify them as victims.

The number of minors, however — most girls, and most found alive — who have been recovered in Michigan over the past four years has been on the rise, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigations, which leads the human trafficking task force in Michigan, coordinating with the Michigan State Police and local law enforcement agencies.

Between 2016 and 2019, the number of minors who were recovered rose from 153 to 241, Glennon said.

But recidivism is high, he said. Law enforcement encounters 52 percent of recovered girls again during future investigations, Glennon said. He estimates that closer to 80 percent of the girls who are recovered return to the streets and their traffickers, based on social media reviews and other investigations.

"What we were seeing is if we'd put a young lady into a non-secure facility, she'd walk right out," Glennon said.

Nonprofits providing mental health treatment for victimized girls actually became recruitment grounds, with pimps hanging out at the back door, waiting for girls to come out, Glennon said.

"We now have the capability to petition the courts to indicate a child is a danger to themselves ... (and) to have them remanded to a secure facility ... where they can't leave" and can get the treatment they need, he said.

The Michigan Human Trafficking Commission in December recommended a new package of human trafficking bills aimed at expanding training requirements for professionals, strengthening tools to hold traffickers accountable, expanding protections for victims of trafficking, and revising the criminal justice system's approach to commercial sexual activity, otherwise known as prostitution, Kelly Rossman-McKinney, communications director for Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, said in an emailed statement.

Among other things, the legislation includes provisions to increase penalties for customers of commercial sexual activities to felonies.

But there are no commission initiatives aimed at establishing rural, secure treatment facilities in Michigan, McKinney said

New center, new approach

Vista Maria's new secure treatment site will include an emergency health wing and residential mental health treatment, a new model for treatment of young trafficking victims.

The single-story building includes an emergency wing with medical, forensic interviewing and waiting rooms, 16 bedrooms, living and dining areas, staff offices and courtyards.

With the new, secure center, "no one can get in, and the girls in there are not free to leave," Aufdemberge said.

It will open with more than half its bedrooms filled.

Some girls can immediately move into an open setting. But generally, referrals from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan State Police or law enforcement referrals will come into the secure site, Aufdemberge said, and then step down or improve enough to move into the open center.

"We want her to go where it best fits her mental health needs," Aufdemberge said.

Girls typically will spend 4-16 weeks in treatment, preparing to return to their families or to Vista Maria's nearby open treatment site.

For some, however, like those victimized as young as 11 years of age, who viewed their trafficker as a parent, treatment could take longer, Aufdemberge said. The new center will provide trauma-informed treatment for those who need it, with the goal of stabilizing them and moving them to an open setting as quickly as possible.

The DHHS Division of Victim Services has \$1.6 million in contracts with 48 Michigan agencies to provide services to victims of human trafficking, said Bob

Wheaton, public information officer for the department.

The majority provide community-based outpatient treatment for human trafficking victims, he said.

In Southeast Michigan, those include Alternatives for Girls, Wayne County Neighborhood Legal Services, Common Ground, Wayne County SAFE, Turning Point, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, Centro Multicultural LaFamilia, and LGBT Detroit.

Just two, Vista Maria and Wedgewood Christian Services in Grand Rapids, offer residential treatment for females, Wheaton said. And Vista Maria is the only agency that has a contract with the DHHS Children's Services Agency to provide human trafficking services to child victims.

"Community-based services are our preference because we work to keep children in their homes and in their communities whenever safely possible. Residential treatment is used as a last resort," Wheaton said.

However, "There is a need for more beds for human trafficking victims in Michigan. There's agreement on that from our Division of Victim Services and our Children's Services Agency."

Looking for hope

Kids get into trafficking situations because of a lack of people caring for them, Reese said.

"Our campus keeps them safe, but it also helps them build the confidence to return home."

Sally has been at Vista Maria for nearly a year now. She knows she made a bad choice using drugs, Reese said, so they don't spend much time discussing that. Instead, they focus on the trauma that happened to her and trace it back to its root causes, particularly the lack of love she felt from her mother.

"In trafficking she had a false sense of hope and love. It came at a cost," Reese said. "She had to give up something: her body, her ability to make decisions on her own because she was coerced or forced through drugs."

She's now at the point where she is confident, feels she's worthy, has developed a social network among the girls at Vista Maria and is doing well in school, Reese said.

Her mother has also come to the campus for joint family counseling, and Vista Maria will continue to counsel Sally and her mother for six months after Sally returns home to make sure both have the support they need.

Anyone can build a center with a fence out front, Reese said.

"What's really important is the staff relationships that show (you) care. These kids get into these trafficking situations because of the lack of ... people caring for them.

"Our campus keeps them safe, but also helps them build the confidence to return home."