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Vista Maria

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It's been a longstanding issue in the child welfare system that families are not always at the forefront of the process, Vista Maria CEO Megan Zambiasi said.

"We decided we wanted to change that, especially since the focus is getting kids back with their families," she said.

Whether biological or foster, parents want to be more involved without feeling like things are just happening to them, she said.

Dearborn Heights-based Vista Maria provides therapy to youth and families, residential care for girls who are survivors of abuse and neglect and in the child welfare system, on-campus schooling for them, services for human trafficking survivors and foster care services in the community.

Last year, the 140-year-old nonprofit formed an advisory council of parents who have engaged with the child welfare system in some way in the past. The group is providing basic advice on what would be helpful for kids and families in Vista Maria's residential program. The nonprofit, which is operating on a \$32 million budget, also hired two "parent ambassadors" who've been through the process with their own children. Those new staff members answer questions and provide other peer support

The nonprofit plans to hire two additional parent ambassadors by 2025 to extend the program to the families of children in foster care in the community, as well.

In the past, the system has been top-down. We are trying to take feedback and ... improve it at a grassroots level," Zambiasi said.

The family-driven model is already helping to improve family connections, Vista Maria said, noting it helped bring about reunifications for 34 families in its residential and foster care programs last year.

The approach is the latest in Vista Maria's bid to be responsive to the needs of the people it serves. In 2020, it launched a wraparound program to support youth and families dealing with behavioral health issues, financial pressures and other family stressors that put them at a high risk for abuse, neglect and intervention from Child Protective Services.

The program provided academic support, employment assistance, behavioral counseling, resource referrals, and mentorship to 12 families in its pilot year and is serving more than 45 families this year.

Photo: Chief Development Officer Mary Vogt (from left), Chief Operating Officer Meredith Reese, Chief Executive Officer Megan Zambiasi and Chief Financial Officer Kathy Regan of Vista Maria. Credit: Provided

By [Sherri Welch](#)