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WellHouse launches new program to assist trafficked children

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WELLHOUSE



By [Stephanie Rebman](#) – Editor-in-Chief, Birmingham Business Journal
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[Chapple Watkins](#)

Person

A metro Birmingham nonprofit is launching a new division that specializes in helping children.

The WellHouse and its 18-member staff have been in the planning stages for almost two years on its new program, WellHouse Child.

The Springville-based nonprofit that provides a safe residential environment as well as support services to women who have been exploited through human trafficking is upping its focus on another segment of the population that is sexually exploited: children.

According to WellHouse Advancement Director [Chapple Watkins](#), the first child was rescued in November through the new division, and four more minors have been helped since then.

"There are many variables that will affect the amount of children we will serve," Watkins said. "We anticipate assisting 15 to 20 in the first year, and we

project growth each year thereafter, both for in-house services and off-campus services such as referrals, transportation, medical care and therapy."

WellHouse has contracted with a program director to oversee WellHouse Child and plans to get her on board full time as the program grows.

"Our long-term goal is to provide a full-service residential treatment program on our 63-acre campus," Watkins said. "We will provide female child trafficking victims with medical and dental care, housing, food, clothing, therapy programs specific to victims of sexual exploitation, and a loving, family-like environment."

To provide the various services, the nonprofit has a dedicated staff member directing the program, working to facilitate the rescue and relocation of minor trafficking victims. In partnership with UAB, the WellHouse Child director arranges for the safe transport of the child to UAB for medical stabilization. The director then finds a recovery program out of state, or other suitable solution, where the child can be safe and receive therapy services.

In the second phase of WellHouse Child, the nonprofit staff hopes to expand to create a facility and residential therapeutic program on its Springville campus. It would follow on the heels of WellHouse's recent capital campaign.

"Our most recent capital campaign raised funds for the transitional-living apartment home built on our campus for graduates of the WellHouse program," Watkins said. "We opened the apartment facility in May 2019, and we have two mothers with children living there as well as several graduates of the program."

Watkins said the nonprofit has served close to 500 victims of human trafficking since opening in 2010, with 100 of those victims being in 2019. Watkins said the new program comes at a key time given trafficking is the fastest-growing crime globally, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

"According to a Polaris study done in 2017, an estimated one out of seven endangered runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children were likely child sex trafficking victims," Watkins said. "Of those, 88% were in the care of social services or foster care when they ran. The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 40.3 million victims of human trafficking globally – 25% of them are children, and 75% are women and girls. We can safely say that in 2019, well over 10 million children are trapped in sex trafficking around the world. We want to find, rescue and restore these children."