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The WellHouse opens Alabama's first facility for trafficked minors

By Josie Howell, Times Assistant Editor, jhowell@thestclairtimes.com

Aug 17, 2021



The WellHouse in St. Clair County opened the state's first facility for minors who are survivors of human trafficking. It is the first of its kind in Alabama and few others exist in the United States.

By Josie Howell, Times Assistant Editor, jhowell@thestclairtimes.com

The WellHouse in St. Clair County has opened Alabama's first home for the safety and recovery of minors who are victims of human trafficking.

Since opening in 2017, WellHouse's St. Clair County location has taken in more than 600 survivors of human trafficking. Interstate 20 that runs through St. Clair, Talladega, Calhoun and Jefferson counties is considered the sex trafficking super highway of the United States. WellHouse CEO Carolyn Potter emphasized, however, the organization takes survivors from all over the country.

She added that the local organization has the largest array of services in the country in order to help those victims.



“Right here in St. Clair County, you have the biggest and the best,” she said.

Potter said there was a major need for the children’s wing as the average age of those first getting into the human trafficking industry is anywhere from 12 to 14 years old, yet that there is not a single program in Alabama dedicated to survivors of human trafficking in that age group and few within the United States.

The CEO added that building a home for young survivors has been apart of the WellHouse’s strategic plan since it started in 2011, however, a lot more goes into helping a minor who has survived human trafficking. This includes special licensing from the state to house minors in a group setting along with enrolling the girls in school.

The WellHouse has recently collaborated with the St. Clair County Board of education to enroll the young girls in the system’s virtual learning academy. Potter said there is also a program in place for those looking to obtain their GED instead.

Anyone of any age who comes into the WellHouse program is provided with an array of free services including any therapy needed, especially trauma focused care, along with those who may need drug rehabilitation.

UAB also staffs a medical clinic on site for any care needed such as dental, eye and mental health care. Potter said the program also has a partnership with Alabama Psychiatry if anyone comes in with severe mental health issues.

Because the WellHouse is a non-profit organization, it relies solely on grants, partnerships and donors who are willing to support the cause. Those in the program are able to stay as long as they need to no matter what age until they are ready to transition into society.

Doug Gilmer with Homeland Security investigations helps with the rescuing of victims and refers these victims to the WellHouse. He said currently human trafficking is the number one priority within his department.

“We work very hard when we do make a successful recovery of a victim to try and get them to the WellHouse as both a place of safety but also a place where they can get the care and help that they need,” Gilmer said.

He added that the new children's wing is something that is much needed as the youngest victim he has rescued was just 9 years old.

“There is no other facility in the state where we can take minor victims where we can meet their specific needs,” Gilmer said. “In the 3½ years I've worked in Birmingham, that has been our biggest issue when it comes to the sex trafficking of minors, is there's no where to take them.”

Gilmer said before, these victims would get turned over to DHR, however, they aren't the best equipped to handle those specific situations and they often have a hard time finding foster homes for them.

“Honestly, kids can be sleeping in an office at DHR for days until they find a home,” he said, adding the new home for younger survivors is not only a benefit for Homeland Security, but a resource for the entire country as few exist..

Both Potter and Gilmer emphasized that almost every survivor who comes into the program suffered from sexual abuse as a young child.

“We're often dealing with multiple traumas, complex trauma,” Potter said.

“We just try to pour into everybody, individually, because not everyone will need the same thing, so they're ready to go out on their own and not feel like they ever have to go back to that world again.”

Assistant Editor Josie Howell: 205-884-3400.

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Josie Howell