

<http://www.thenewtribune.com/news/local/article72748282.html>

April 19, 2016 4:50 PM

Tacoma drop-in center dedicated to helping youths affected by human trafficking

Advocate builds relationship with victims, gives them place to get food, rest, other services

Program is first in county to specifically work with human trafficking victims

Organization hopes to find funding for second advocate

Carlyn Sampson, program coordinator and community advocate for Yes to Hope!, an organization that provides services to victims of sexual trafficking, gives a tour of the program's new drop-in center. By Alexis Krell akrell@thenewtribune.com

By Alexis Krell

akrell@thenewtribune.com

The brick office where Carlyn Sampson works near the Tacoma Dome feels more like a loft apartment than a work space.

And that's the idea.

The cozy space, decorated with bright colors, is a business-hour drop-in center for victims of human trafficking in Pierce County. They have access to food, a shower, a TV, hygiene products, a couch to nap on, and computers.

Sampson is a community advocate and the program coordinator for YES to Hope!, which organizers say is the first program in the county to work specifically with sex trafficking victims.

The program started in July, within Rebuilding Hope, the Sexual Assault Center for Pierce County. In September, it opened the drop-in center at 101 E. 26th St., which by that time had become inundated with referrals for people who might need help.

“It was just like a floodgate,” said Tasha Smith, executive director of the sexual assault center.

Sampson works regularly with about 40 clients, between the ages of 11 and 27. The program focuses on youths, but sometimes takes adults as clients.

Referrals come from just about everywhere, including schools and police. The first 20 or so came from Pierce County prosecutors.

And there's a 24-hour crisis line, where victims or anyone concerned about them can call for help.

Some days, Sampson gives youths a ride to court or to therapy, or helps them find clothing.

"I take people just about everywhere," she said.

Sampson works late if she needs to, including on weekends. A second advocate is badly needed, she said.

"There's only so much that one full-time person can do," she said.

The City of Tacoma gives the program \$50,000 a year, and Smith estimates the operation costs closer to \$100,000.

In addition to victim services, the center does presentations about consent and what can lead to human trafficking to students at local middle and high schools, as well as to kids in juvenile detention at Remann Hall.

In addition to the costs of the program, Smith said, one of the challenges is convincing youths to accept help in the first place.

"We get girls who don't feel like victims," she said.

Lakewood Police detective Ryan Larson, who investigates human trafficking, said that's why he'd like to see a secure facility for juvenile victims.

As soon as a youth is released from Remann Hall, he said, it seems as if he or she instantly disappears, losing any chance of connecting to victim services.

"All I can do is book her in," he said.

If there was a place other than detention to take juvenile victims, Larson thinks, the window to reach them might be longer.

In the meantime, he said, local victim services, such as the Pierce County Sexual Assault Center, help keep victims involved in cases.

Therapists are available at the drop-in center for victims who want to speak with them, and there's a weekly group session. Most days, one to three girls are at the center, but on group days it sees as many as six.

None of the center's clients was in a position to be interviewed by a reporter, Sampson said, in part for their safety to keep their situation confidential from people who have exploited them.

Sampson keeps in touch with victims who go away to treatment facilities, at times emailing 10 messages a day, to make sure they have someone to talk to.

Some of the youths Sampson works with have been deemed at-risk for trafficking, but might not yet be victims. The support and services Sampson offers those girls is the same.

It starts with confidentiality.

When Sampson talks to victims, they don't have to worry about what they tell her getting them in trouble with police or prosecutors.

That's key to building relationships, she said.

"Otherwise I'm just another cop trying to get them into (juvenile detention at) Remann Hall," Sampson said.

Sometimes a client settles into a new life, but finds it overwhelming and runs away from the stability, back to the sex trade.

In many of those cases, Sampson said, she will have become close with the youths by then, and they'll keep texting or talking to her on Facebook. They might just check in periodically to let her know they're OK, or to ask a question about warrants.

And sometimes, they'll ask her for help to get settled again.

That's the hope.

Alexis Krell: [253-597-8268](tel:253-597-8268), [@amkrell](https://www.facebook.com/amkrell)

Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article72748282.html#storylink=cpy>