



Benedict Center

Compassion • Justice • Action • Transformation



The Sisters Program South Collaborative

The Sisters Program South Collaborative is a faith-based partnership formed to expand programming to address the complex issue of street prostitution and sex trafficking on the south side of Milwaukee. The Collaborative partners are the School Sisters of St. Francis, Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Sinsinawa Dominicans, the Sisters of the St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis, the Benedict Center and Ascension Lutheran Church

History: The Benedict Center initiated the Sisters Program in 2011 with a pilot project designed to assist women engaged in street prostitution, or who are coerced/sex trafficked, find the hope, skills and support to live safer lives. This project was initiated because of interactions and discussions with women and police on the impact of street prostitution and the fact that women face high levels of violence, drug addiction, trauma, sexually transmitted diseases, and extremely high rates of victimization on the streets including sex trafficking and homicide. The primary goal of the Sister Program is to create systemic change in the criminal justice system so that women are given the opportunity to engage in evidence-based treatment alternatives instead of the revolving door of arrest and incarceration.

Why this is Important: Prostitution and sex trafficking disproportionately and negatively impacts women. Research demonstrates that women who engage in street prostitution face high levels of violence, drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, and extremely high rates of victimization on the streets, including homicide. The research is also consistent that many women engaged in prostitution were sexually abused as children. The trauma of their early experiences impact their lives. Many experience failure to adjust and learn in school; extremely poor sense of self-worth; a pattern of unhealthy relationships; a stressful, violent, impoverished environment; alcohol and drug addiction; and depression or other mental illness. Often, the issue of street prostitution is primarily addressed in the criminal justice system. However, the revolving door of arrest-incarceration-release back to the streets does little to impact the serious health and safety risks they face in their lives. In an effort to break the revolving door of arrest-incarceration-return to sex trade, the Sisters Program offers a new approach.

Current Sisters Program: The Sisters Program is an innovative partnership with the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) 3rd District, community and faith-based organizations and neighborhoods. Currently operating on the northside of Milwaukee, services include: 1) Street Outreach Workers who connect with 130 women annually (800 contacts), providing information, support, and building rapport; 2) Drop-in Center services that include respite, triage, safety planning, crisis management, psycho-social educational groups and connection to housing and other resources; and 3) Sister Leaders leadership training and support for graduates of the program who provide leadership counsel in shaping and informing services, meeting with program partners and sharing their stories. This diversion approach has been shown to be a more effective way to reduce crime and improve economic development in neighborhoods, while also helping women to gain life skills and the confidence to live safer, healthier lives.

The New Sisters Program South Collaboration:

A new Collaborative has formed to replicate and expand the Sisters Program model on the south side of Milwaukee. As with the northside location, the Sisters Program South will be implemented with the Milwaukee Police Department, and will provide street outreach for women and drop-in services including respite, peer support, safety planning, case management, psycho-educational support groups, and connection to housing, shelters, and mental health or substance abuse services.

The new site also proposes to add health, wellness and spirituality components for women to support changes in their lives. These new components will embody inclusivity, support interfaith spirituality programs, and honor the already existing spiritual lives of women in the program. With the assistance of Sister Linda Szocik, a Nurse Practitioner, health and wellness components will include health screenings for women with facilitated referral to free and community health centers as needed. In the first year of start-up, partners will be recruited to provide natural healing therapies (massage, acupuncture), substance abuse and mental health counseling, and other wellness activities onsite. The Sisters Program South Collaboration provides many opportunities for volunteers with the skills and gifts to offer these services.

The Benedict Center looks forward to building constructive partnerships to be part of the solution to this issue.



Benedict Center

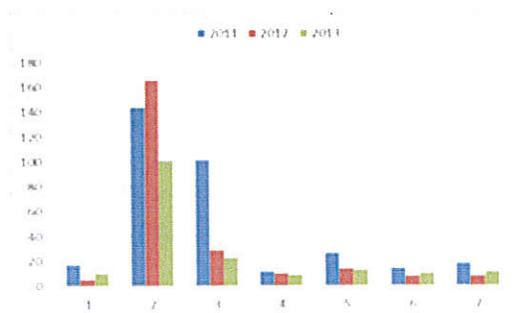
Compassion • Justice • Action • Transformation

The Sisters Program

The Issue: Street Prostitution

Street prostitution is a complex issue affecting residents and businesses as well as women involved in the sex trade. Women engaged in street prostitution (hereafter “women”) face high levels of violence, drug addiction, trauma, sexually transmitted diseases, and extremely high rates of victimization on the streets including sex trafficking and homicide. In the Washington Park Partners Sustainable Community Plan, and in the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program survey, residents identified prostitution as a top priority. However, traditional law-enforcement strategies of arrest and incarceration do not offer long-term solutions. Furthermore, these strategies are resource-intensive and costly to tax payers. The Sisters Diversion Project is an innovative community-police partnership so that women engaged in prostitution are given the opportunity to engage in treatment instead of the revolving door of arrest and incarceration. This project also engaged and coordinated with other community development efforts to decrease the negative impact of street prostitution on the quality of life and economic development of the neighborhood.

“We cannot arrest our way out of this problem”



Number of Women Arrested for Prostitution by District (2011-2013):

- 75% of women arrested in MPD-2, 3
- 749 women were arrested 2804 times

The Solution: A Community-Police Partnership

In April 2011, the Milwaukee Police Department – District 3 (MPD-3), the District Attorney's Community Liaison Unit and the Benedict Center launched an innovative approach to street prostitution. Instead of costly undercover police operations to arrest women for prostitution, the police would conduct more visible operations or "sweeps" where they would arrest women and bring them to the Sisters Program for a treatment alternative to a ticket, fines or incarceration. Participants have the opportunity to have their charges dropped if they successfully complete a six-month program with the Sisters Program. By attending programming and agreeing to be monitored, women access counseling and other resources that will help them build safer and healthier lives instead of trading sex for survival. This partnership was awarded two consecutive grants from the Medical College of Wisconsin to expand and study the impact of this innovative partnership. Key to this project is the support and involvement of a multidisciplinary team of residents, business owners, faith leaders, and community development organizations. This project is now part of the strategic community development plan.

The Model:

Sisters "Drop-In" Center



Programing includes:

- Respite
- Safety Plans
- Support Groups
- Case Management
- Outreach

Underlying Principals & Best Practices:

- Harm Reduction
- Gender Responsive
- Trauma Informed
- Evidence Based

Results, Recognition, Replication

Program partners understand that women engaged in prostitution do not typically change overnight. Several studies, confirmed by our experience, demonstrate that a woman's ability to exit the streets may take a minimum of two years. Access to basic needs like safe housing is a key factor. This means that we meet women where they are and work with them to create a plan to reduce their risk and increase their health and safety for at least two years.

From 2011-2014:

- From 2011 to 2014, 71% of women who accepted the diversion (45 women) completed the diversion program and stayed engaged beyond the minimum 6 months.
- Only 18% of women incurred a new prostitution charge in the year following enrolment.

In 2015:

- Street Outreach Workers connected with 131 women a total of 849 times.
- 84 women were served in the Drop-In Center, including 41 new participants.
- 31% of women in the program reported quitting the sex trade
- 55% of women achieved at least one case management goal within 6 months of the program.

Recognition and Expansion:

- Sisters Program received 2 MANDI Awards- the PNC Trailblazer Award and the Wells Fargo People's Choice Award
- This project has been presented to the Cook County CJC and the Rockford Police Department; it was also presented at NAPSA, a national pre-trial conference.
- Efforts are underway to expand this project in Milwaukee Police Department- District 2 with funding support from the Medical College of Wisconsin and the Open Society Fund.

Innovative, Effective and Cost-Saving:

Our partnership catalyzes the collective power of community: community policing, community prosecution, community development and community based treatment. All stakeholders, despite various disciplinary perspectives and practices, are committed to the common goal of making the neighborhood a safer and healthier place.

The Sisters Program represents Milwaukee's commitment to problem oriented policing:

“Problem-oriented policing places a high value on new responses that are preventive in nature, that are not dependent on the use of the criminal justice system, and that engage other public agencies, the community and the private sector when their involvement has the potential for significantly contributing to the reduction of the problem.”

The Sisters Diversion Project is an innovative and cost-saving solution to street prostitution rather than the revolving door of arrest and incarceration. It addresses the root causes of the women's problems and in doing so, offers relief to the community that has been besieged with street prostitution. This project is ready to expand and make significant difference in Milwaukee.

