

Restoring Human Trafficking Survivors in Michigan with Vista Maria

The United States Department of Justice defines human trafficking as “the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts or labor or services against his or her will”. Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal enterprises in the United States, and annually across all 50 states, there are between 100,000 and 300,000 youth at-risk for commercial sex exploitation. The average age for a child forced into a life of exploitation is just 14 years old and, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 60% of young survivors of human trafficking have had contact with the child welfare system.

For more than 10 years, Southwest Airlines has supported Vista Maria, a nonprofit organization located in Southeast Michigan that provides safe harbor and mental health treatment to youth survivors of human trafficking. Through the partnership, the organizations have worked together to raise awareness through special events and needed funds to provide services to survivors. Vista Maria provides treatment and restoration services to over 50 youth survivors annually and has worked with over 200 survivors since opening the first dedicated treatment program. This January, Southwest is raising awareness in recognition of Human Trafficking Prevention Month by sharing Vista Maria’s efforts to restore the lives of adolescent female survivors of human trafficking.

For more than 135 years, Vista Maria has been a leader in the care and education of Michigan’s most victimized youth and has helped thousands of girls and youth heal from severe abuse including sex trafficking. In addition to treatment services, Vista Maria raises awareness of human trafficking by advocating for services for survivors and providing human trafficking prevention training for youth. In 2020, Vista Maria opened the Aaron and Helen L. DeRoy Freedom Center, Michigan’s only licensed emergency intake and stabilization treatment housing program for female survivors of human trafficking. The innovative design of the Freedom Center was based on input from survivors, FBI, law enforcement, child protective services, and clinicians. At the Freedom Center, young survivors from police rescue operations come to a single, secure and trauma informed setting to undergo medical evaluation, forensic interviewing, and begin to receive immediate treatment and care. The Freedom Center completes Vista Maria’s continuum of care for

survivors from safe harbor, to stabilization, treatment, education, community reintegration or transitional housing as well as career and/or college development. For a virtual tour of the Aaron and Helen L. DeRoy Freedom Center visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jEuJz6LIIA> .

This building's abbreviated name, the "Freedom Center" was suggested by a survivor advocate and the name provides a positive frame of mind for young survivors to begin their empowerment journey. Prior to coming to Vista Maria, youth experienced abuse, neglect, and exploitation often by individuals known to them including trusted family members and friends. Building bonds of trust are essential to recovery and healing. Vista Maria's goal is to provide a safe, welcoming environment where each youth can overcome trauma, restore self-worth, and build necessary skills for independence and success.



It takes a Fearless Heart to overcome the challenges of abuse and exploitation and move forward. Join Vista Maria and Southwest Airlines in protecting youth and continuing the fight against human trafficking. For more information about Vista Maria and to join the fight against human trafficking, please visit www.vistamaria.org.