



Benedict Center

The Sisters Program helps women in the street-based sex trade find hope and live healthier and safer lives through a harm reduction and housing-first approach.

We believe all women in the street-based sex trade should be treated with dignity and respect. We seek solutions informed by women with lived experience, in partnership with neighborhoods, organizations and government institutions to advocate for:

- adequate, affordable and accessible housing
- drug treatment
- trauma counseling
- prevention of violence against women, including sex trafficking sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse.

Public health systems like housing and treatment tailored to help women in the street-based sex trade are the solutions we need instead of the current criminal justice approach. The revolving cycle of arrests, jail and release is not a long-term solution for anyone. Instead, it creates additional harm and fails to address women's underlying needs.

While we work toward these systems changes, we provide harm-reduction based services and advocacy for women. Our Street Outreach and Drop-In Centers offer a safer place where women can find basic needs like food and clothing, receive crisis support, counseling, sexual assault advocacy, housing navigation, and connection to other critical resources.

NEWS

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A Call for Change

While our community struggles through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have begun to confront the public health crisis of racism on a level not seen since the Civil Rights Era. The murder of Mr. George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer brings issues of police brutality, racial injustice, and systemic racism to the forefront.

The Benedict Center unequivocally condemns the murder of Mr. Floyd and the hundreds of lives taken by police before him. For too long, excessive use of force by police has been swept under the carpet and too easily dismissed by those who have the privilege to go about their daily lives without fearing they or their loved ones could be next.

It is time for white people in the U.S. to be deeply and continually disturbed by the reality of the structural, racist violence that Black people and other Communities of Color continue to face in our country and to take action to end this violence *now*.

As a community justice agency, the Benedict Center will not be complicit with silence in the face of injustice. We must be visible and audible in the condemnation of police violence and the call for change. We must be active in the movement to end structural violence against Black and Brown people in America.

United together, we can ensure that Mr. Floyd's death is not merely a flashpoint in history, but a tipping point for lasting change, racial justice and human dignity.

COVID-19 Response: Providing Essential Services During a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted all of us and changed how we move within the world. This is especially true for the women we serve who are more vulnerable to the effects and community spread of COVID-19, particularly because many of them are homeless or housing insecure. The Sisters Program continues to support our participants through this unprecedented crisis by providing essential services and advocacy in a modified manner for the health and safety of participants and staff.

Our Sisters Street Outreach Team made 216 contacts in May, providing a hot meal, care packages with hygiene items, and helping women connect to housing and other basic needs on a daily basis.

While we temporarily suspended the typical services offered at our Drop-In Center, Sisters Program participants can come to the Drop-In Center for a modified "counter service" where they can receive food and meet with a staff advocate for other basic needs. In addition, the staff are working creatively to serve Sisters clients through text and telephone contact and via coordinated, in-community contacts. We are prioritizing two key objectives:

1. **Helping remaining homeless Sisters clients find temporary places to shelter**
2. **Providing cell phones/plans for clients so they can be in direct communication with our advocates, counselors, and housing navigators.**

As a result, four women were housed since March, five women are sheltered with hotel vouchers, and



The Importance of Street Outreach

A critical component of the work we do at the Sisters Program is street outreach. We meet women where they are, and provide some of their basic needs like food and hygiene products. Over time we establish and build relationships. It is through these relationships that our clients begin to trust our staff to help them gain access to longer-term resources like housing, case management, and counseling through our Drop-In Centers.

Our street outreach staff might spend several weeks meeting with clients before the clients feel comfortable going to the Drop-In Centers. Recently, we have begun enhancing our outreach by having one of our case managers accompany outreach specialists to provide real-time triage to clients until they feel ready to come to the Drop-In Center.

If you see a woman in your area you're concerned about, please contact Darlene, our Outreach Specialist, at 414-793-5883 or email her at ddyson@benedictcenter.org. Include the location of the woman and any physical identifying information (no pictures please). Darlene will reach out to the woman on her next outreach. Our outreach team works from 11am to 4pm Monday through Thursday.

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How Much Does Childhood Trauma Matter for Adults?

The short answer is, quite a lot! Why?

Childhood is the time when most of our brain development happens and we are learning about the world around us and how to exist in it.

Counselors have long recognized the impact of childhood on adult behavior, emotions, and patterns of thinking. In the late 1990s, CDC-Kaiser Permanente conducted the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse, neglect, household challenges, and later-life health and well-being.

This study looked at the links between negative (adverse) childhood experiences like abuse, neglect and loss, and the resulting adoption of "high-risk health behaviors" to cope with those childhood experiences (for example, smoking or overeating). The study showed that over time those coping behaviors can grow into big problems such as emphysema, COPD, diabetes or heart disease. The lesson was that trauma in childhood, especially unhealed/untreated trauma, can be a major driver of social and health problems in adulthood including addiction, mental health problems, and homelessness.

This eye-opening study and those that followed have greatly changed the way medical and behavioral health practitioners view the problems their clients are struggling with. Professionals from hospitals to courtrooms are learning to ask, "*What happened to you?*" in a way that seeks to understand. This greater understanding allows all of us to provide better, more compassionate, and more helpful services.



CLIENT CORNER

SISTERS STORY OF THE MONTH

Taken from a handwritten letter to staff.

My mother was married young and my father was a violent drunk who beat my mother often. They were divorced by the time I was two. My father had numerous girlfriends and wives who would physically abuse my sister and me. My father was always breaking promises and always choosing his wives over his kids. The last straw was when I was 13 and my stepmother beat me. My father took her side and of course sent me off to a group home and foster care. By the time my mother took me back I was pregnant with my first child. I was 15. By 17, I was in jail for battery. I lost custody of my son and went into a downward spiral. It wasn't until a couple of years ago that I got out of that spiral. I got into drugs and alcohol, became a gang member, and was running the streets. I had more kids who I lost custody of. Two of them were born addicted to drugs. I finally had enough when I was pregnant with my last daughter and living in my car. I detoxed and started going to the Benedict Center Sisters Program. Once I joined, I was in full force. I have been in groups and case management. I have been clean since October of 2018 and am working towards my GED. I regained custody of my kids and my life is finally having some order. I plan on becoming a peer support specialist. I owe all my achievements to the Sisters Program. My case manager Jasmine, all the staff, my kids and God helped me be strong enough to keep going and accomplish my goals. The Benedict Center Sisters Program works and helps you if you want the help.

*Thank you, Sisters Program.
Anonymous Sister*

Anonymous Sister is always willing to help around the Drop-In Center and has been a great leader in supporting her fellow sisters. We look forward to seeing her continue to grow as a person, mother, and leader in her community.



PERSONAL MOTTO :

“Everyone deserves a second chance.”

MEET OUR STAFF

A veteran of the Sisters Team,

Darlene Dyson is one of our street outreach specialists who goes out every day to meet our clients. Darlene and another co-worker begin the day by making bag lunches and hygiene packs. Darlene also likes to bring hygiene products, undergarments, and clothing items in case clients don't feel comfortable going to the Drop-in Center.

Darlene and other outreach staff talk with women, build relationships, and offer hope, caring support, and connections to critical resources. Without Darlene and the street outreach team, many clients might not know that the Sisters Program exists and is available to help them.

Darlene has been described as open-minded, dependable, and caring. She is deeply passionate about connecting with our clients in the community. Her vast outreach knowledge stems from her previous work as a youth outreach specialist, and the Sisters Program is fortunate to have her wisdom on our team. Darlene's wealth of knowledge is invaluable to building trust with our most vulnerable clients. Her personal motto is “everyone deserves a second chance.”

In her personal time, Darlene likes to listen to jazz, spend time with family, read spiritual affirmations, and go shopping. If she could travel anywhere it would be Maricopa, Arizona, or Paris.



Pandemic continued from page 1

24 women were provided cell phones to maintain contact with staff advocates.

The pandemic is a time of community-wide struggle, but also of amazing collaboration with community partners and supporters. The Milwaukee County Housing Division and IMPACT 211 are key for connecting women to housing, and the Hunger Task Force sponsoring hot meals by Fresh and Safe are just a few examples that directly benefit women. None of us could do it alone - but together we will prevail.

We will continue to provide essential services and advocacy to women in as safe a manner as possible for participants and staff while following the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the State of Wisconsin, and the Milwaukee County Health Department.



Benedict Center

Compassion • Justice • Action • Transformation

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- School Sisters of Notre Dame
- School Sisters of St. Francis
- Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida
- Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi
- Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis



"A growing & healing garden, thank you volunteers!"

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For more information please contact the Benedict Center's main office at **414-347-1774** or visit our website at www.benedictcenter.org.