

## **Amirah, Inc. Opens Community Resource Center for Exploited Women**

Among the many things that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken away: shelter and support for victims in the sex trade. Violence against victims has increased and many survivors of exploitation have returned to the sex trade after losing hard-earned jobs or housing.

In response, Amirah, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping survivors of sexual exploitation, opened a Community Resource Center in Lynn, MA, on January 25, 2021. In partnership with East Coast International Church in Lynn, the Center offers case management, survivor mentorship, clinical therapy, group programs and healing activities for women who are at risk of being exploited or are currently being exploited. Designed to minimize common barriers to access, the Center is located in a walkable communal location and offers on-site childcare—all at no cost to the women Amirah serves.

“An unfortunate truth about exploitation is that individuals are exploited and trafficked out of their lack of resources or vulnerable circumstances—perhaps it is lack of housing, lack of income, lack of mental healthcare, or lack of a safe space for their children,” says Amirah CEO Stephanie Clark. All of those vulnerabilities have been exponentially compounded over the past 11 months of the pandemic.

Since 2015, the organization’s residential program has created safe spaces in Massachusetts and Connecticut that offer women the time and resources to exit exploitation and move toward independence, healing and wholeness. “This program works for some women, but we acknowledge that a residential setting is not ideal for every woman’s needs and recovery,” says Chief Impact Officer Mary Speta, whose lived experience along with other survivor members of Amirah’s team shaped the vision for the Center.

The goal of the Center is to reach women living in exploitation, and particularly women with children as they face heightened challenges in exiting exploitation. “Traffickers commonly use children as leverage to control the women they are trafficking,” explains Speta. “[Childcare and access to services] could be the difference between a woman exiting exploitation and not.”

The Center gives women the opportunity to self-identify as being trafficked, exploited or prostituted, and then to access services designed to help them meet their goals for safety, exit, independence and recovery.

“We are especially grateful to the survivor leaders on our team whose lived experience created the vision for the Community Resource Center to meet the real, tangible needs of women still trapped in the cycle of exploitation,” says Clark. “We are grateful to the survivor voices out in the community who continue to share and speak up about ways to tangibly support them.”

**About Amirah:** *Amirah exists to provide aftercare, resources, and opportunities to women who have survived different forms of sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and prostitution. They offer residential recovery opportunities, organize outreach efforts, and educate communities, providers, and policy makers on the unique challenges victims and survivors face in the Northeastern United States. Amirah’s residential branch offers long-term recovery programs with an individualized, trauma-informed, whole person approach at safe homes in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The outreach branch brings survivor-led groups to incarcerated women and women in shelters who are at risk for exploitation or have been exploited. Amirah synthesizes what it learns from its work with external data to advocate for changes to policies that break down exit barriers and make recovery and independence possible for more women.*