

A Vision Worth Sharing

Sisters Program South Celebrates 10 Years of Collaboration and Hope

A decade after faith communities came together to respond to women trapped in Milwaukee's street-based sex trade, the vision that became Sisters Program South continues to grow.

It was in 2016 that a small group of women religious and faith leaders in Milwaukee decided that women experiencing exploitation, violence, and life in the street-based sex trade deserved something different. Not another arrest and fine. Not another trip through what Sister Linda Szocik of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF) described at the time as the "revolving door of arrest-incarceration-release back to the streets."

They envisioned a place of welcome. "I knew I could not do it alone," Sister Linda recalled, "so I invited others to dream and brainstorm with me."

Among those invited to dream were the School Sisters of St. Francis. The answer was immediate "There was no question," recalled Sister Carol Rigali, who was then serving on the United States Province Leadership Team. "We said, 'Let's do it.'" That willingness to say yes helped launch an interfaith partnership whose impact continues a decade later.

On April 1, 2016, the School Sisters of St. Francis joined the Benedict Center, Ascension Lutheran Church, the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, and the SSJ-TOSF sisters in signing the memorandum of understanding that became the foundation for Sisters Program South.

Less than a year later, on January 2, 2017, the doors opened at Hope House on Milwaukee's Near South Side. "Our dream came true," Sister Celia Struck of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi later wrote in *Global Sisters Report*.

A different response

The collaboration grew from recognition that the traditional response to street prostitution was failing both the women involved and the neighborhoods where they lived.

The Benedict Center already had experience with an alternative. Its Sisters Program on Milwaukee's north side offered women an opportunity to receive counseling and other services rather than simply moving through arrest, incarceration, and release. The collaborators believed that approach was needed on the south side as well.

"The revolving door of arrest-incarceration-release back to the streets does little to impact the problem, or to personally affect the lives of the women," Sister Linda said as Sisters Program South was getting underway.

For the School Sisters of St. Francis, the emerging ministry resonated with a congregational commitment to “claim our identity as prophets of hope.” It also offered a concrete way to stand with women who were frequently among the most marginalized members of the community.

The vision was intentionally collaborative. Religious communities could contribute financial resources, volunteers, expertise, prayer, and advocacy. The Benedict Center could bring its experience serving women involved in the criminal justice system. Law enforcement, prosecutors, health professionals, neighborhood organizations, and other community partners could contribute their own knowledge.

“It takes a community to build a program,” Sister Fran Cunningham of the School Sisters of St. Francis said in 2017. That community was already forming well before the center opened. Sister Linda has since recalled gathering with a dozen other “dreamers” to share their stories and consider what each could contribute.

After two years of conversations and meetings, the original faith partners entered into their formal relationship with the Benedict Center. The result was something greater than any one organization could have created alone.

Opening the door

Sisters Program South began welcoming women at Hope House on January 2, 2017. The location included a small kitchen, showers, sleeping space, dining and living areas, offices, and meeting rooms. Although based on the south side, its services were available to women from throughout Milwaukee.

The idea behind the center was deceptively simple: Begin by giving women a place where they could feel safe. “The women can stop by anytime during the day to take a nap, shower, do their laundry, or have something to eat,” Sister Carol explained at the time. There was no expectation that walking through the door would immediately transform a woman’s life. Building relationships and trust would come first.

“The plan is to slowly gain the trust of these women by providing them a place to rest during the day and, in time, help them with their self-esteem enough for them to want to change their lives,” Sister Fran explained.

Women could also connect with health professionals, social workers, and spiritual counselors and receive referrals for housing, shelter, addiction treatment, and other services. That approach was important because the circumstances bringing women into the street-based sex trade are rarely simple. Violence, addiction, poverty, homelessness, abuse, and trafficking could overlap in complicated ways. The founders understood that women needed time, safety, and relationships before lasting change could take root.

Sister Diana De Bruin of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, who now serves as Vicar for Religious with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, described her congregation's participation as an expression of its commitment to "nurturing a deep sense of the worth of every person and all of creation."

"We stand in solidarity with those on the margins of society through prayer, presence and/or service," she said, adding that the collaboration could help women develop the "skills, education, counseling and experiences that they need to have a better life and to become more independent and self-assured."

A blessing – and a public commitment

Although women had been using the center since January, July 13, 2017, marked another important milestone: an official opening, blessing, and press conference.

Sisters and other faith partners gathered at Hope House with representatives of the city, county, Milwaukee Police Department and neighborhood organizations. Sister Marilyn Ketteler represented the School Sisters of St. Francis United States Province Leadership Team, while Sister Fran and Sister Linda represented the Sisters Program South advisory board.

The gathering made visible something that had been taking shape quietly for months: Sisters Program South was not simply a project of religious communities. It was becoming part of a broader community effort.

"The July 13 event was an official opening, blessing and press conference," Sister Linda explained. "It was specifically intended to help get the word out to the area and to have the city, county, police department and neighborhood leaders represented."

Contemporary news coverage underscored the breadth of that partnership. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported that the new center was the result of collaboration involving the Benedict Center, resident and interfaith groups, Milwaukee police, the district attorney's office, Milwaukee County Housing Division and the Medical College of Wisconsin. The newspaper also reported that more than \$500,000 in private donations and \$100,000 from Milwaukee County had helped fund the south-side site.

Sister Fran and Sister Rosemary Huddleston of the Sinsinawa Dominicans led the blessing prayer. For Sister Rosemary, participation was consistent with the Dominican tradition of advocating for people pushed to society's margins. She described the Sinsinawa Dominicans' support for Sisters Program South as an extension of their longstanding outreach to women experiencing poverty and their corporate stance against human trafficking.

For all of the collaborators, the blessing represented more than the opening of a building. It was a public commitment to another way of seeing the women who would walk through its doors.

“I am humbled by the show of support and love that we are bringing to women who suffer from violence, trauma, and poverty, and who deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, compassion, and support,” said Jeanne Geraci, the Benedict Center’s Executive Director.

Taking compassion into the streets

The founders understood that a welcoming building would not be enough. Some women would never come through the door unless someone first went out to meet them.

Street outreach therefore became an essential part of the partnership. A \$100,000 grant from Impact100 Greater Milwaukee helped purchase a mobile outreach vehicle capable of bringing assistance directly to women and providing transportation to the center.

Over time, those outreach teams became a familiar and trusted presence in Milwaukee neighborhoods, distributing meals and hygiene supplies, checking on women’s well-being, and offering connections to counseling, housing assistance, and other resources.

Over the past decade, the collaborative program has continued to evolve as the needs of women became clearer.

In a 2020 *Global Sisters Report* reflection, Sister Celia described homelessness as a primary barrier to leaving the street-based sex trade. Sisters Program South responded to that reality through housing navigation and, during Milwaukee’s coldest months, a warming room offering meals, showers, and overnight lodging. Within the first two years, 171 women had made 2,293 visits to the drop-in center, while street outreach specialists made 622 contacts with women across Milwaukee.

Yet Sister Celia suggested that numbers alone could never adequately measure what was happening. “Small acts of kindness are so very powerful,” she wrote for the *Global Sisters Report*, describing the significance of a home-cooked meal, a handwoven scarf, laughter, companionship and the experience of truly being heard.

Behind those gestures was a deeper conviction: healing from abuse requires safety; healing from neglect requires compassionate attention; overcoming stigma requires dignity; and healing abandonment requires connection and belonging.

Rooted in the Neighborhood

The Sisters Program South collaborative has grown, with four additional communities of women religious subsequently joining the collaborative: the Congregation of Sisters of St.

Agnes, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida, and Sisters of the Divine Savior. Representatives of the participating congregations and Ascension Lutheran Church continue to provide guidance through the Sisters South Advisory Board. The Benedict Center describes the collaborative as providing financial support while also helping coordinate engagement by members of the participating faith communities.

The School Sisters of St. Francis have remained part of that ministry throughout the decade. Our support has helped provide meals, transportation and other assistance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the program adapted through street outreach, telehealth, wellness checks, and carefully managed in-person services, that commitment continued.

Jeanne Geraci has credited that steadfast partnership with helping sustain the ministry. “The commitment of your donors, volunteers, and the entire Sisters South Collaborative are directly responsible for the success that the Sisters Program has achieved,” she told our congregation. “Your ministry has given thousands of vulnerable women in Milwaukee hope that there is a pathway to a better life.”

A decade after the memorandum of understanding was signed, that pathway continues to be built one relationship at a time. In 2017, as the fledgling ministry was just beginning, Sister Rosemary expressed a hope for its future: “Our dream is that Sisters Program South will become firmly rooted in the neighborhood.”

Ten years later, that dream does indeed have roots, and the invitation that began Sisters Program South – to meet women with dignity, compassion and hope – continues. “Hometown Heroes,” the accompanying feature in the Fall 2026 edition of *Alive* magazine, explores how Sisters Program South carries that original vision forward today through harm reduction, street outreach, and advocacy for stable housing.