

Sycamore Farm works to combat human trafficking issues

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THE PIONEER NEWS

SHEPHERDSVILLE — Sycamore Farm LY, LLC, was created to provide assistance for exploited and sex trafficked women and to help them find freedom following traumatic life ordeals.

Recognizing January's designation as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, followed by National Freedom Day Feb. 1, Sycamore Farm hoped to remind the community of the many dangerous situations to avoid, providing resources and educational tools to combat issues.

First established in Louisville, Sycamore Farm now supplies much assistance to Bullitt County, according to executive director Cindy Crawford, including a jail outreach program since 2023 with the Bullitt County Detention Center.

"We realized that many of our women were coming through the incarceration system," Crawford said.

Sycamore Farm provides a faith-based curriculum called Ending the Game, helping to allow participants a better understanding of the joy, peace and forgiveness they deserve. Jail mentors are provided as part of the jail's outreach, with mentors encouraging and praying with participants.

A Bible study support group takes place each Saturday over 6-8 weeks at local churches. The program is geared toward participants who are not as comfortable with traditional Bible studies.

Once established in the detention center, Crawford said Ending the Game defined correlations between traf-

ficking and exploitation, along with drug use and mental issues.

"There are overlapping issues," she said. "People are being put into a box. Those labels stick to them."

According to Crawford, meeting victims in the detention center allowed Sycamore Farm representatives an opportunity to discuss situations within a controlled atmosphere.

"Going to them at a place where they're half-sober, we can reach them," she said. "We discuss their susceptibility to being manipulated."

Sycamore Farm provides a more feasible alternative to continuous incarcerations. Crawford said the average cost of an inmate in the state jail system was around \$46,000 annually. Though Sycamore Farm was higher, at \$56,000, she said the benefits of its residential program were worth it.

"We include their basic needs, therapy, life skills, and hope," she said. "We also provide reduced risks versus being re-arrested. It costs a little bit more but they get so much more out of it."

Sycamore Farm is a donation-based non-profit organization, and Crawford admitted it was also a faith-based program. However, there were no specific religious requirements enforced onto clients.

"If we can look at women for who they are... not saying their consequences, but reaching out to them in jail, then providing case monitoring, help stop their cycle of bad decisions and abuse... that's our goal," Crawford said. "We help stop recidivism. In turn, it heals the community."

Crawford added that a hope was to end the "revolving door" of victims re-entering the system while redirecting back into society.

"The victims are breaking laws for bad reasons," she said. "They don't have the resources, nor the ability for stability. They need more than just consequences."

According to Crawford, as many as 80 percent of trafficking victims had been arrested at least once.

"There was a need to help women who were exploited and trafficked stop and get out of that situation," she said. "People believe they can just get up and walk away from the coercion, the lies, the manipulation."

According to Crawford, many trafficking victims were manipulated and taken advantage of because of their vulnerability. Common issues included age, homelessness, and language barriers.

"Someone is taking advantage of them," she said. "Whether it's labor trafficking, or sex trafficking, it's the same M.O., manipulating someone with needs... food, love, money... we want to bridge that gap and help them get free, to share their true worth, to provide life skills."

Crawford said age appeared to be the primary reason behind trafficking issues. She mentioned that the average age of a sex trafficking victim was between 9-12 years.

"Trafficking victims statistics always said 12-14, but our research shows that 'familiar trafficking' begins at nine," said Crawford. "It's usually people they already know. Six percent of the time it's their biological mother. Or it's family members getting access."

Crawford also reminded that the United States was the number one country of consumers for commercial sex.

"Human trafficking is happening all around us," she said. "It happens in Bullitt County."

Crawford described how victims were groomed, with predators constantly pushing boundaries.

"They're preparing the victim for what they want them to be used for," she said. "Slowly, every time, until it seems normal. It breaks down that trust."

She added that the predator could be anyone the victim knows, including teachers, police officers, church pastors, even boyfriends and girlfriends.

"They are everywhere and they can be anyone," she said. "It's no longer just stranger danger. We need to teach how to protect from everyone, and to listen to their bodies. Learn who the safe people are in their lives. It may not be their parents, and that can be scary."

To provide further assistance for local trafficking victims, Sycamore Farm established a residential program, Freedom House, to help women escape their scenarios. First created in Louisville, Crawford said the program now takes place in Bullitt County.

"There was a need for women to have a place to go, to not worry, and to focus on healing," Crawford said. "There was nothing like that here."

The program came to Bullitt in May 2023 with the opening of Freedom House, just after the Ending the Game program began in February 2023. Both

may assist the same individuals in improving their lives.

"At the jail, we're teaching curriculum and Bible studies," said Crawford. "We're connecting them to resources. We're empowering them with truth and understanding, so they won't make the same mistakes."

Freedom House provides a long-term program, about 12-18 months for each participant. Crawford said the overall goal was to find a job, a place to live, and the ability to remain self-sustainable. Case management is also provided.

"Each individual may need separate things, but it's about making them self-sustainable and making healthy choices," she said.

Sycamore Farm provides a case manager, program director, and residential assistants, as well as a board of directors. Crawford said the organization was always seeking members with skills to help grow and reach the program, helping with both capacity and accountability.

"You don't have to be an expert on human trafficking," said Crawford. "The oversight team helps to maintain accountability."

Volunteer services may include event planning, social media and website maintenance, volunteer training, assistance with craft shows, even gardening and yard work at Freedom House.

During its first year, Crawford said Freedom House could host two individuals with emergency assistance and two for the long-term program. She said two additional long-term participants will be added annually as the program continues to grow.

"In the long-term there are

four phases," Crawford said. "Self-sustainability is the goal. At least they will all have a better chance at making it."

Over its first three years Freedom House hosted 17 women. Through the detention center program, Crawford said 300 women were mentored and spoke with in that same time period.

"We do what we can to help them get what they need," she said. "We know other organizations to help them if they do not fit our criteria. On average, we make about a call a week."

Crawford mentioned that program participants know all of the many requirements up front.

"At the end of the day, they have to want it," she added. "They have to do the work or they won't last. And they do not have to be a person of faith, we do have alternative programs. Our focus is through the lens of Jesus... we're trying to be Christ-like."

As a non-profit, Sycamore Farm programs and members are supported via donations and fundraisers, with three to four annual events. Crawford mentioned the "Gift for Her Gala" planned for September.

For prospective volunteers, Crawford said a Mugs and Mission event takes place each month at various locations, allowing program members to discuss issues. The next Mugs and Mission takes place Saturday, Feb. 7, 9-10:30 am, at The Well Coffee Co., 5225 New Cut Rd. in Louisville.

For more information about Sycamore Farm, or to make donations, visit sycamorefarmky.org.

FOX

FROM PAGE A1

and the executive session could be approved as a single document.

Edison said there was no problem doing that.

However, the council opted to keep the two sets of minutes.

However, the council went into executive session to discuss pending litigation. Following the closed session, the council returned to open session and voted to join the county in its opposition to the state certificate of need to allow Zoneton Fire Protection District to begin an EMS with an additional 10 cents per \$100 of taxes.

*Krauss reported that turning the original speed limit sign on Sussex Drive to show northbound motorists their speed has worked to slow down drivers.

He asked for locations on the two new speed signs on Fox Chase Drive. Mayor Owen Taylor said Krauss would know the locations to place the signage.

*Krauss also reported that a patio home development off Preston Highway and John Harper Road will be decided by the Pioneer Village City Council.

The planning commission gave the request a favorable recommendation with restrictions.

*There was no update on any development of property west of Sussex Drive, according to Krauss.

He felt that some type of truck storage could be placed on the property. However, there would still be hurdles to jump and he would notify the city whenever anything is filed with the planning commission.

*Selby said that the city should soon be able to codify

its ordinances. He has spent the past year trying to get copies of all of the city's ordinances.

He asked fellow councilmembers to look to see if there are any ordinances that need to be repealed. Edison said some, such as annual tax ordinances, have a certain lifespan and others could supersede some ordinances.

At the end of the day, Selby said it would be important to have a total list of the ordinances and an index allowing people to find what they are looking for.

*Selby also asked about updating the city's website. He said there are names for councilmembers who no longer serve listed.

Chad Laswell, who has some prior work experience on the website, said he would talk with city clerk Joy Priddy to see if things could be updated.

The next meeting of the

Fox Chase City Council will be on Tuesday, Feb. 10, at

7 p.m. in the UofL Health South Hospital Medical Plaza

1. The public is invited to attend.

On behalf of myself, my family and my staff, a **HUGE THANK YOU** to everyone who worked so hard to keep Bullitt County safe during the recent snowstorm. Your around-the-clock effort should be commended and praised. Because of your efforts, Bullitt County is a safer place to live and to work. Thanks to all who played a part in this great team effort.

Paulita Keith
Bullitt County Circuit Clerk



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LEGAL NOTICE

The Bullitt County Extension District Board is seeking Construction Manager to assist in expanding and renovating the Bullitt County Extension Office in Shepherdsville. All RFP's are due to March 9th.

Specs are on file and able to be downloaded at lynningimaging.com

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