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NEWS

New drop-in center aims to be refuge for San Diego's sex-trafficked teens

By Teri Figueroa, The San Diego Union-Tribune *The Tribune Content Agency*

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 Missy Bell, program director, shows the therapy room of the center. Olive Crest introduces a new drop-in center designed to reach victims of sex-trafficking by offering a small respite in downtown San Diego. (Alejandro Tamayo / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Missy Bell, program director, shows the therapy room of the center. Olive Crest introduces a new drop-in center designed to reach victims of sex-trafficking by offering a small respite in downtown San Diego. (Alejandro Tamayo / The San Diego Union-Tribune) Alejandro Tamayo *TNS*

From the outside, it's just an old building in downtown San Diego. Nothing gives a clue about the offerings in the works inside, that this place will be a refuge for sex-trafficked teens.

Here, teens can come get a bite to eat, charge their phone, get access to toiletries. There's a comfy couch and big screen TV bathed in low light, and a quiet room to maybe close their eyes for a few minutes. They can even spend time with an on-site counselor if they like.

The idea is to provide safety and services. The hope is to draw them in, build trust and show them a pathway out.

This site in San Diego is one of a handful of drop-in centers in Southern California geared specifically to children and teens ages 12 to 18 who are being trafficked for sex. They can come on their own or be referred by agencies, including law enforcement.

The centers are part of a three-year, \$10 million state grant to [Olive Crest](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing child abuse. Olive Crest, based in Orange County, was founded more than 50 years ago.

The San Diego site is expected to open next month. Its downtown location is no accident, just blocks from main trolley stops and not far from wraparound services offered through [Your Safe Place](#), a Family Justice Center that works with victims of violence and abuse.

It will be similar to one Olive Crest opened in Anaheim a few months ago, where it appears word about its existence is spreading. More than 100 teens have stopped by the Anaheim center, and - this is encouraging - 17 of them have made a return visit. There are two more new drop-in sites in Los Angeles, with two more planned for that city, as well as one planned to open in Coachella Valley.

Olive Crest CEO Donald Verleur said that after talking with different counties as well as the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force, its leadership saw a gap in offering care for children under the age of 18 who are sexually exploited.

“The goal is for a safe place for kids under the age of 18 that have been trafficked, that they can go and be in a safe place with no strings attached. It’s to build the relationship. These children really don’t trust any adult or institution,” he said in an interview.

In a statement, Verleur said teens are exploited by people who give them “a fake sense of care. Our approach is to meet these young survivors exactly where they are,” and to do so without judgment.

Supporters of the new effort include the District Attorney’s Office and the county’s Health and Human Services Department.

But it also has high-profile backing from Padres relief pitcher Jason Adam, who said he and his wife Kelsey were immediately moved to take part, donate and use their platform to bring attention after learning about the organization and its work during a sermon at church. “We were just drawn to Olive Crest,” Adam said.

According to information on the [District Attorney's Office website](#), 80% of San Diego's sex-trafficking victims were born in the United States, and on average, they first become victims when they are between 14 and 17 years old.

Prosecutor Tracy Prior, chief of the district attorney's Family Protection Division, said the office has long worked with Olive Crest, which provides help from toy drive to lining up foster parents. She said the office considers itself an ally to the drop-in center project.

"They have this long-standing kind of history of really providing hope to families," Prior said of Olive Crest, "and it doesn't surprise me at all that they're doing something like this innovation to just expand and extend that kind of service from heart to really help.

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