

My Life My Choice, A Program of Justice Resource Institute 2014

My Life My Choice is working to stem the tide of commercial sexual exploitation of girls in the United States. Through victim-centered mentoring, prevention education, and advocacy, MLMC is educating and empowering girls to find a positive life path and working to eliminate the violence of sexual exploitation. MLMC offers a unique continuum of services spanning provider training, prevention groups for vulnerable adolescent girls, case consultation, and survivor mentoring to young victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

MLMC is able to have a significant impact on a hard-to-reach population by employing survivors as administrators, group leaders, trainers and mentors. Their first-hand accounts of victimization have informed group and training curricula and are the voice of authenticity to girls entrapped in a life of abuse. We are the only organization in Massachusetts to employ our unique model. In 2006, MLMC was recognized by the United States Department of Justice as a national model for sex trafficking prevention and in 2010, MLMC was named one of Root Cause's Social Innovators for the year. In 2012, MLMC was one of only three organizations nationally to receive a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice in support of mentoring initiatives for child victims of exploitation.

MLMC is a program of Justice Resource Institute (JRI), created in 1973 to respond to the most resistant problems of child human services and juvenile justice. Each JRI program is highly expert and broadly known in its field of concentration.

My Life My Choice intends to use support to expand and deepen our Survivor Mentoring Program. Survivors are ideally suited to provide key mentoring services to exploited adolescent girls. Victims of exploitation, and girls who are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation, live with complex histories of trauma that make finding safety and stability outside "the Life" difficult. Our survivor-led model connects girls in crisis to an unwavering support system and a relationship that heals instead of hurts as they work towards finding a path to recovery. As leaders in the field of anti-exploitation work, we understand that this journey takes time. Girls never "age out" of our program. Mentees can access their mentors for as many years as they need to, as they get on their feet and enter adulthood. This reflects the evidence that to be most effective, mentors must be consistent and willing to invest at least one year. MLMC Mentors invest far more than that, as we support a girl as she moves from victim to survivor. Our goal is that we are there to then support her as she moves into the role of leader--in her personal life and, if she chooses, in the movement to end CSEC. Further, we travel to see girls wherever they need us: in foster homes, hospitals, treatment facilities, and their communities. Many mentoring relationships continue for years as they grow, deepen, and change to fit what a young woman needs to grow into a healthy adult.

In the Greater Boston area, principal responsibility for referral of victims of commercial sexual exploitation rests with the SEEN (Support to End Exploitation Now) Coalition. Led by the Children's Advocacy Center of the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, SEEN has established a coordinated, multidisciplinary response network to support exploited youth and hold exploiters accountable. In addition, because of MLMC's strong community network, girls are directly referred into the Survivor Mentoring program by other agencies and individuals (including concerned mothers, grandmothers, and friends). Further, through MLMC's ten week prevention groups, which are facilitated in group homes, schools, and juvenile justice facilities, many girls self-identify and disclose their own victimization, often for the first time. MLMC Mentors currently reach girls in a radius that extends approximately one hour north, south, and west of Boston.

MLMC Mentors each spend a minimum of one to two hours per week face to face with each girl, as well as phone and texting whenever needed. Mentors help girls build the intangible skills that they need to be successful, healthy adults: self-worth, a positive self-image, the ability to trust, and the tools to know how and where to seek help when they need it. Mentors also play a pivotal role in helping their mentees recover from the trauma of exploitation by connecting them with much needed services beyond our scope: therapy, substance abuse treatment, etc.

Through these mentoring sessions, the mentee is supported in looking at the experience of exploitation and the potential for movement toward exit and stabilization. The mentor's primary role is to instill a sense of hope that can only come from someone who can authentically say "I was where you are and now my life is better, and free from exploitation." Mentors are encouraged to use their own experiences in their conversations with young people; however, mentors are trained on appropriate boundaries within these kinds of disclosures, when to disclose, and how to practice self-care.

In addition to connecting with a Survivor Mentor, girls also become part of the MLMC "family" in which we try to create the same things that pimps offer: love, nurturance, safety, fun, community, and a sense of belonging. Among these opportunities, MLMC Mentees have the opportunity to become members of our Leadership Corps. Through this innovative, strength-based leadership initiative, MLMC aims to build the skills of girls who are often not seen as leaders or given access to opportunities to achieve excellence. MLMC's Leadership Corps' goal is to challenge the stigma often assigned to survivors of the commercial sex industry by harnessing their resilience and outrage. We believe that these survivors are poised to become true leaders and agents of change in the national movement to end exploitation, as well as strong female role models in their communities, precisely because they have survived so much.

MLMC needs to expand our services now. One of our proudest accomplishments in 2011 was our involvement in drafting Massachusetts anti-trafficking legislation. Enacted in February 2012, this legislation ensured that minors who have been exploited receive specialized services, not jail time. Under the new act, MLMC has seen an enormous uptick in referrals, as more minors are being identified as victims of CSEC. The pressing need for our services is a challenge, but also a unique opportunity to spread awareness and reach those most in need of support.