



Empowering Youth. Ending Exploitation.

ORGANIZATION HISTORY DESCRIPTION

In 2001, a young Boston woman was brutally murdered while being commercially sexually exploited. She was 17 years old and living in a Department of Children and Families (DCF) funded group home. Unbeknownst to any of the caring adults in her life (her family, her DCF worker, the group home staff), she was being sold for sex. Following her death, city leaders came together to ask "was this an isolated incident or the tip of the iceberg?" We quickly learned it was the tip of the iceberg. Out of Latasha's death, My Life My Choice was born.

My Life My Choice is a groundbreaking, nationally recognized leader in the fight to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We offer a unique continuum of services including Survivor Mentoring, Prevention Education, Professional Training, and Advocacy. We are the only anti-human trafficking organization in Massachusetts employing a survivor-led model proven effective in helping youth leave harmful situations and build new lives for themselves.

In 2006, My Life My Choice was recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice as a national model for sex trafficking prevention and in 2010, was named one of Root Cause's Social Innovators for the year. One of our most profound systemic accomplishments occurred in 2011 when we helped draft Massachusetts anti-trafficking legislation. Enacted in 2012, this legislation ensured that exploited minors receive specialized services, not jail time. In 2014, My Life My Choice was featured in a documentary by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn called "A Path Appears", in which the most impactful models for change were highlighted. In 2016, we were chosen as Social Venture Partners Boston 2016 Investee. Most recently, My Life My Choice has been named an Accelerating Change Awardee from the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

COMMUNITY NEED

Every day, young people are bought and sold for sex in our communities. They are deceived, manipulated or coerced into the commercial sex industry. The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the U.S. is an epidemic that has garnered little attention. However, this is beginning to change as more and more people speak up and take action against this outrageous form of child abuse which pits vulnerable and marginalized youth up against a multi-billion dollar sex industry.

Adolescent girls, particularly those abused, neglected, or exposed to family violence and addiction, are especially vulnerable to recruitment by pimps. It is reported that the most frequent age of entry into sex trafficking nationally is 12-15 years old. Among the girls we served last year, the average age of first exploitation was 14 – middle schoolers. Often, these girls are hidden in plain sight—in our schools, group homes, juvenile justice facilities, and probation departments. Pimps, also known as traffickers, systematically target vulnerable youth by frequenting locations where they congregate—malls, schools, bus and train stations, group homes and social networking sites such as Facebook. Today, the internet gives pimps greater access to a wider array of girls. They are able to reach girls through conversations on social networking sites, later selling those girls' service on the same sites.

ORGANIZATION MISSION, GOALS & CORE PROGRAMS

The mission of My Life My Choice is *to prevent the commercial sexual exploitation of adolescents through survivor-led programs that educate and empower youth to find their voice and create a positive life path*. We believe that children have a fundamental human right to live their lives free from exploitation—without fear that adults will prey on their vulnerabilities. To change this landscape, we specifically aim to decrease the incidence and severity of commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Massachusetts.

The central goals of our work are to:

- Empower youth to protect themselves from the commercial sex industry and its predators.
- Support survivors in rebuilding their lives, finding their voice, and becoming leaders.
- Educate and mobilize a powerful network of allies to prevent exploitation.

To achieve these goals, our core program areas include:

1) SURVIVOR EMPOWERMENT: (One on one Mentoring, Intensive Case Management, Leadership Development) Reaching 200 girls annually

2) PREVENTION EDUCATION & SOLUTIONS (10-Session Exploitation Prevention Curriculum, Prevention Groups, and consultation) Reaching 160 local adolescent girls annually

3) PROFESSIONAL TRAINING & ADVOCACY Reaching 3,000 providers and law enforcement annually

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our programs aim to reach girls (we are also able to provide mentoring to boys and transgender youth) between the ages of 12 and 24 in the Greater Boston area who are victims of, or are vulnerable to, commercial sexual exploitation. Last year we reached 198 girls, 5 boys, and 1 transgender youth in our Mentoring Program. Among the youth My Life My Choice served last year, the most frequent age of first exploitation in the sex industry was 14 – middle schoolers. The majority of the youth we serve are of color and come from low-income families; 32% of our mentees identified as Hispanic/Latina, 31% White, 22% Black/African American, 2% Asian, and 13% mixed race. Eighty-five percent were involved with the child welfare system.

SURVIVOR MENTORING PROGRAM

My Life My Choice is seeking a grant of \$10,000 from the Framingham State University Nonprofit Giving Course to support the continued growth and enhancement of our cornerstone Survivor Mentoring Program. We are receiving more referrals for youth in need of our specialized service than we can keep up. Grant funding will support a portion of salary and benefits for one full time Survivor Mentor who will provide direct mentoring to 10-15 exploited youth in her first year. Aligned with the goals of the Nonprofit Giving Course, My Life My Choice aims to equalize access to opportunity for a highly marginalized population.

In our successful Survivor Mentoring Program, exploited and/or very high risk youth are paired with an adult female survivor of the commercial sex industry. This model connects girls in crisis to an unwavering support system and a relationship that heals instead of hurts as they work toward finding a path to recovery. Our mentors, who are survivors of and experts on the commercial sex industry, are uniquely able to decrease a victim's sense of isolation and support her as she builds a new life for herself.

An effective survivor mentor understands the impact of trauma and is able to understand an adolescent's behaviors within that context. Mentors travel to see girls wherever they need: in

foster homes, hospitals, treatment facilities, and their communities. When connected to a multidisciplinary team for service provision, experiences show that a girl's relationship with a survivor increases the likelihood that she will utilize the services at her disposal and work toward a service plan, including educational planning.

To ensure a safety net around our most vulnerable girls, we work with a variety of youth service providers who help us connect girls with multidisciplinary services and opportunities for growth and exploration. To identify girls in crisis, My Life My Choice works with the local SEEN (Support to End Exploitation Now) Coalition through a referral system. My Life My Choice also has close relationships with law enforcement at the local, state, and federal level, which allows for immediate response to girls identified. We work in partnership with our mentees' collateral support workers and case managers if applicable. This successful multi-disciplinary response model is being replicated across Massachusetts.

Leadership development permeates all of our programs. We believe that survivors are poised to become true leaders and agents of change in the national movement to end exploitation, as such survivors lead our programs from prevention education to intervention, training, and advocacy. As part of our Survivor Mentoring Program, mentees have the opportunity to become members of our Leadership Corps. Through this strength-based leadership initiative, we aim to build the skills of girls who are often not seen as leaders or given access to opportunities to achieve excellence. We strive to involve girls in meaningful work that builds their skills as leaders within the organization and in the larger national movement against exploitation.

IMPACT AND EVALUATION

As referrals keep coming in, we are working tirelessly to grow responsibly, sustainably, and strategically to address the needs of our community and expand our reach and impact. We will measure the effectiveness of activities based on our abilities to offer responsive, sustainable programming that meets the needs of exploited and at risk youth. The success of our Survivor Mentoring Program will be measured over the next 12 months based on our ability to achieve the following:

- Provide mentoring to more than 175 exploited and/high risk youth, 10-15 of whom will be supported directly by this grant.
- 100% of Mentees receive leadership development opportunities.

The overall goal of My Life My Choice is to prevent the commercial sexual exploitation or re-victimization of children. By preventing the exploitation and/or re-victimization of adolescents, we are not only protecting them from a life of abuse, violence, and degradation, but increasing the likelihood they will finish high school which is important for a number of positive outcomes including, decreased rates of sexually transmitted diseases and a decreased likelihood of living in poverty. We assess how our programs in the short term based upon qualitative and quantitative measures in all of our program areas. In our Survivor Mentoring Program, we monitor the number of youth served as well as factors including how long they engage with their Mentor. We regularly seek feedback from youth participants and progress updates from staff. The areas of progress we monitor in our mentoring program include:

- Ability to end involvement in exploitation and resist returning to exploitation
- The ability to build trust with their mentors and share feelings, thoughts, and experiences

- Development of a more positive self-image and self-esteem
- Increased willingness to access and become involved in support services
- Positive life progress including making future plans, attending school, working, etc.

“My Life My Choice has helped me find myself: who I am, who I want to be, my own strength and inspiration. I haven’t done it alone. I have built relationships with everyone here. They have become my family. I have newfound patience and compassion for the people in my life. Summer Leadership Corps has taught me so much about myself and how to have healthy relationships with the people around me. The staff and other girls have helped me so much and I hope I’ve helped them too. “

--Samantha, age 16

We are excited to share that we are nearing the end of a three-year mixed methods evaluation of the My Life My Choice program which is assessing outcomes for youth who receive mentoring services at six and 12-months post-baseline. In addition, the evaluation also assesses outcomes for youth who participate in 10-session psychoeducational prevention groups at the conclusion of the 10 sessions and 3 months post-baseline. Qualitative data is being collected to provide additional information about youths’ expectations of My Life My Choice mentorship services and satisfaction with them. The research team leading this evaluation represent both Boston University School of Public Health and Northeastern University. We will share the results of this study with you once they are finalized.

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE AND COLLABORATION

My Life My Choice is a program of Justice Resource Institute, a diverse agency created in 1973 to respond to the most resistant problems of child human services and juvenile justice. My Life My Choice receives a fiscal infrastructure (i.e. payroll and accounting) as well as administrative/overhead support (human resources and IT) through this relationship. We contribute 9.4% of our revenues for this support and do not receive any financial assistance from JRI. We have our own Advisory Board and are solely responsible for our own strategy, programming, and budget.

My Life My Choice is led by Co-Founder and Director, Lisa Goldblatt Grace, LICSW, MPH. Associate Director and survivor of commercial sexual exploitation, Audrey Morrissey, provides the bulk of our trainings nationally and locally as well as direct mentoring, prevention group facilitation, and guidance for mentors. She has been with My Life My Choice since 2003. Together they lead a dedicated staff of 19 which includes 11 survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Reflecting the diversity and experiences of the youth we serve is the foundation of our survivor-led model and what allows us to make a significant impact on a hard to reach population. My Life My Choice programs are led, informed, and monitored by survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Fifty percent of our Senior Management Team are survivors of the commercial sex industry, and 40% of our overall manager-level staff are survivors. A diverse and active Advisory Board made up of 13-15 Boston area professionals provide guidance to My Life My Choice staff. We collaborate with numerous providers, law enforcement, and state leaders on a regular basis.

SUSTAINABILITY

At My Life My Choice, we work diligently to balance organizational growth with the demand for our programs while ensuring the quality of our services is not compromised. We continue to secure support from a diverse pool of funders, including individual donors and private foundations. We have worked to grow sustainable streams of funding for our mentoring through improved systems of collecting reimbursements from the Department of Children and Families and payment

by individual agencies. We are strategically expanding our Professional Training Program both locally and nationally which serves as an important source of earned income to help sustain our programs. We are also working to build our individual donor program. Through concentrated efforts in each area, we have increased our revenues in our three major streams: Federal and State funds, Earned Income, and Philanthropy – each category currently represents approximately one third of our overall revenue.

CONCLUSION

Exploited youth have an especially difficult time trusting adults. The difference between an adult mentor and an adult survivor mentor is that the bridge between a survivor and a young victim is much shorter and they can build trust that much faster. A Survivor Mentor can then leverage that trust to help the adolescent access additional supports. Secondly, a Survivor Mentor instills hope that only someone who has been exploited and survive can provide. This model is based on the social justice framework that those most affected by an injustice have the greatest knowledge to fix it. This is emerging as best practice and our evaluation will help move us to evidence based.

When My Life My Choice began in 2002, girls were referred to our program after years of exploitation and run-ins with the law. Today, we receive many referrals at the first sign a girl may be at risk of being exploited. This is a huge shift and demonstrates the progress we have made in helping youth serving professionals and law enforcement identify victims and high risk youth, as well as the esteemed reputation My Life My Choice has for working with this hard to reach population. Thank you so much for your consideration of this important request.

USE OF FUNDS

	Request	Total
Full Time Survivor Mentor Salary (\$20/hr)	\$7,500	\$41,000
Fringe Benefits (34.5%)	\$2,500	\$14,145
Phone	0	\$600
Total	\$10,000	\$55,745

