

I am Shared Safety Heather LaRocca, LCSW Director, Salvation Army's New Day to Stop Trafficking Program



Heather's LaRocca's staff of roughly 30 people served 1,300 victims of human trafficking last year—almost 900 alone at its drop-in center in Kensington. "We do a lot with a little, honestly, as I guess all non-profits do," says Heather, [Salvation Army's New Day](#) Director.

Before joining Salvation Army in 2018, Heather worked for several years at Women Against Abuse. Around 2010, as the city started paying more attention to the problem of human trafficking, Heather became aware of how much intersection and overlap existed between experiences of human trafficking and those of domestic and intimate partner violence. When Heather joined Salvation Army, "it was a logical next move."

Stephanie Levin, co-chair of Shared Safety's communications sub-committee, spoke with Heather about the many ways in which New Day supports people affected by human trafficking, how systems have changed in response to trafficking (and what work still needs to be done), and how Shared Safety impacts her work—and ultimately benefits survivors.

SL: What does New Day do?

HL: New Day was launched by The Philadelphia Anti-Trafficking Coalition as a drop-in center in 2010. A few years later, Salvation Army took it over. The drop-center serves people who identify as female; most are street homeless or unstably housed. They can come in, rest, get out of the elements, get clothing, food, and a shower and hygiene products. We have a case manager who can help people find housing or treatment. When the center first opened, we would see two or three people each day we were open; now we could see 30 to 40 a day.

New Day also provides a [transitional housing program](#) and offers rapid-rehousing. We serve as a hub of resources for survivors of sex and labor trafficking, including those who are immigrants. New Day also partners with Child Welfare Services. We have a mobile case management program for victims who are identified through law enforcement. We're also involved with [WRAP \(Working to Restore Adolescent Power\) Court](#), which supports young survivors. Through a partnership with the [Police Assisted Diversion](#) project, a city collaborative offering a social service response to low-level, non-violent crimes whose aim is to reduce recidivism, we provide help and support mostly to people who are arrested for prostitution. Also, New Day runs a hotline, provides peer mentoring services, and offers trainings on trafficking.

SL: What changes have you witnessed at the drop-in center since you've been at New Day?

HL: It's a very intensified small space with a lot going on. Years ago, we saw a lot of people struggling with heroin addiction. Now it's fentanyl and xylazine. Withdrawal is so intense with

these drugs. People using heroin could function and hold down a job, but fentanyl and xylazine are much more life-limiting. We've seen a lot of gangs who deal in drug trafficking, and sex trafficking often becomes part of that.

SL: How do you see systems' responses to human trafficking changing?

HL: There are so many more resources than there used to be, just in the last 15 or so years. But we still need to do better with treating and understanding survivors—and improving responses to trauma and mental health concerns within the city, criminal justice, and law enforcement systems. We also need to do better with helping homeless youth who are being victimized by traffickers.

SL: How does Shared Safety play a role in your work?

HL: Shared Safety and the Office of Domestic Violence Strategies help bridge the gap to serve survivors of sexual assault, human trafficking, and domestic violence. I like having a group of like-minded folks who are doing very similar work, and the willingness to try to do real things to solve real problems. I appreciate the collaboration. Our community does a great job of encouraging that kind of teamwork.

SL: When you're not working, what things do you enjoy doing? How do you manage the stress that comes with this kind of work?

HL: I'm a very social person; I call myself an extreme extrovert. My spouse, two children, two golden doodles, and I live in a community house with three other people. We're always hosting people in our home. I'm also pretty involved with my church.

I really believe that we need to find light in darkness. I've been doing this work a long time, and I've learned what I need to do to keep myself from burning out. When I need a break, I like to go thrifting; I like to organize and decorate and have fun with my space.

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