

# Sojourner House embeds in city to prevent dating violence

By **STELLA LORENCE**  
slorenc@woonsocketcall.com

WOONSOCKET – The federal grant that funds Salena Gibbs’s position in Woonsocket doesn’t cover her attendance at football games, pep rallies and community events, but she goes anyway. That way, she can become familiar to students, and in turn they will feel comfortable coming to her when they need her help.

Gibbs is a “school-based advocate” at Sojourner House, a nonprofit that provides resources for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and offers education and awareness training around building healthy relationships. She works with Woonsocket schools, providing awareness and response for youth who experience

or witness dating violence, through a three-year federal grant. Her role also fits with the district’s broader goal of making sure every student has an adult in the district they are connected to in some capacity, including teachers, coaches, guidance counselors or administrators.

But Gibbs’s role is just one of many connections Sojourner House has established in the Woonsocket school district and the city more broadly as it expands its services.

“A lot of it is building community,” said Lisa Hoopis, director of education and training at Sojourner House. “We do try to not just always be in the students’ face with teen dating violence.”

Hoopis said she thinks

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# House

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of the three-year grant,

which covers both Woonsocket and Smithfield, in three buckets: prevention, intervention and response. Prevention includes

training and awareness campaigns, which Hoopis said has been the main focus recently, since October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

In Woonsocket, Sojourner House has worked with WED administrators to flesh out the training teachers and staff receive on the warning signs of dating violence and human trafficking, and a similar training offered to parents. The organization also collaborates with the district's other community partners, such as Mentor RI and Thundermist, to provide other education and resources around violence prevention and sexual health. Soon, Sojourner House will also offer training to school resource officers around the state, a special expansion granted by the federal program administering the funding because Smithfield and Woonsocket have only a handful of SROs combined.

This is also the second year in a row that Sojourner House has been included with three other outside organizations that provide specialized training to Woonsocket's peer mentors. Hoopis said the organization's training program in Woonsocket was able to specialize because it was building off of the pre-established peer mentor program, which already provides basic training to all participating students. In

Smithfield, by contrast, Sojourner House helped the district build a peer mentor program from scratch.

"People tend to go to their peers before they come to adults," Hoopis said.

Students have responded well to Sojourner House's training, Hoopis said. Although many students chose the Sojourner House training from among the four options because they've experienced or witnessed some kind of dating violence, many also chose to take it because they wanted to be a resource for their friends.

"There was a good amount of people who just wanted the information out there," Hoopis said. "That's what we heard them want: 'We want to be good at responding.'"

Sojourner House employees also sit on the School Committee's Health and Wellness Subcommittee, making recommendations to the full committee around policy and training.

In particular, part of Sojourner House's mission is helping districts around the state comply with the Lindsay Ann Burke Act, which requires schools to teach students in grades 7-12 about dating violence. The act is named after a North Kingstown resident who was killed by her boyfriend at age 23.

Policy changes are at the heart of a lot of Sojourner House's work to create the

lasting systemic change required by many of the grants it receives. In addition to updating district dating violence policy, the organization helps district administration decide on the policies and procedures for responding to incidents of dating violence.

Some of these updates, or other initiatives such as awareness campaigns or data-gathering projects, are also done with input from a community response team made up of parents, students, WED staff and facilitated by Sojourner House. Hoopis said the Woonsocket team has four spaces still open, and parents and students are reimbursed for their time serving.

These policy changes are especially important because they outlast Sojourner's House involvement with a district, said interim Executive Director Kyle McDonald.

"We're leaving the information there," she said. "Education is part of prevention."

Because the first year of the grant was mainly planning, Sojourner House will likely apply for a no-cost extension to carry forward any funding left after the third year of the grant, McDonald said.

But even if Sojourner House's official partnership with the district ends after next year, they still maintain a strong presence in the city. Their satellite office on Cumberland

Street, which opened in 2021, offers many of the same services and resources as their home Providence office.

Sojourner House also recently announced expanded legal services, including direct legal representation, for undocumented immigrants and their children. The organization was one of only eight nationwide to receive the two-year \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Office on Violence Against Women, and the money will allow Sojourner House to hire its first in-house licensed attorney.

Once launched, the new program will help support undocumented clients with divorce, custody, housing and eviction and labor law, building on the organization's existing Immigrant Legal Advocacy program that helps undocumented clients apply for specific kinds of visas.

"With the demand for immigration assistance on the rise, we're excited to be able to expand our service offerings and make legal assistance accessible to all survivors," said Executive Director Vanessa Volz.

If you or someone you know may be experiencing domestic violence, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE, or text "START" to 88788, or visit thehotline.org.

Follow Stella Lorence on Twitter @slorence3.

## LOTTERY NUMBERS

### Friday's RI Daily

Mid-day: 0-8-1-8  
Evening: 0-5-2-1

### Thursday's Lucky 4 Life

9-2-7-1  
n/a

### Friday's Mass. Daily

Mid-day: 9-2-7-1  
Evening: n/a

### Thursday's Mass Cash

21-22-24-29-33

### Thursday's Wild Money

7-16-24-25-31 EB 9

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75 Main St., Woonsocket, RI 02895  
www.woonsocketcall.com

Newsroom fax: (401) 765-2834  
e-mail: notices@woonsocketcall.com  
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