



Chelsea program focuses on protecting young mothers from violence

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By [Deborah Becker](#) and [Laney Ruckstuhl](#)

For more than three decades, the nonprofit Roca has tackled youth violence in the Chelsea area and beyond. Its work initially focused on boys and young men, then expanded to young women. Now the nonprofit is increasingly focusing on a new group: young mothers.

"This population is one that's often misjudged, overlooked, misunderstood," said Roca Executive Vice President Sunindiya Bhala, who oversees programs for women and young mothers. "But they need and deserve support just like anyone else."



Felicia Corrado, a youth worker for Roca Boston, stands outside its Dorchester office. (Deborah Becker/WBUR)

Because of an increase in violence in Massachusetts against women and by women, Roca expanded its young women's outreach program into Boston about two years ago. Bhala said the goal is to build trust with the women and help disrupt what can be generations of trauma, poverty, racism – and in some cases trafficking.

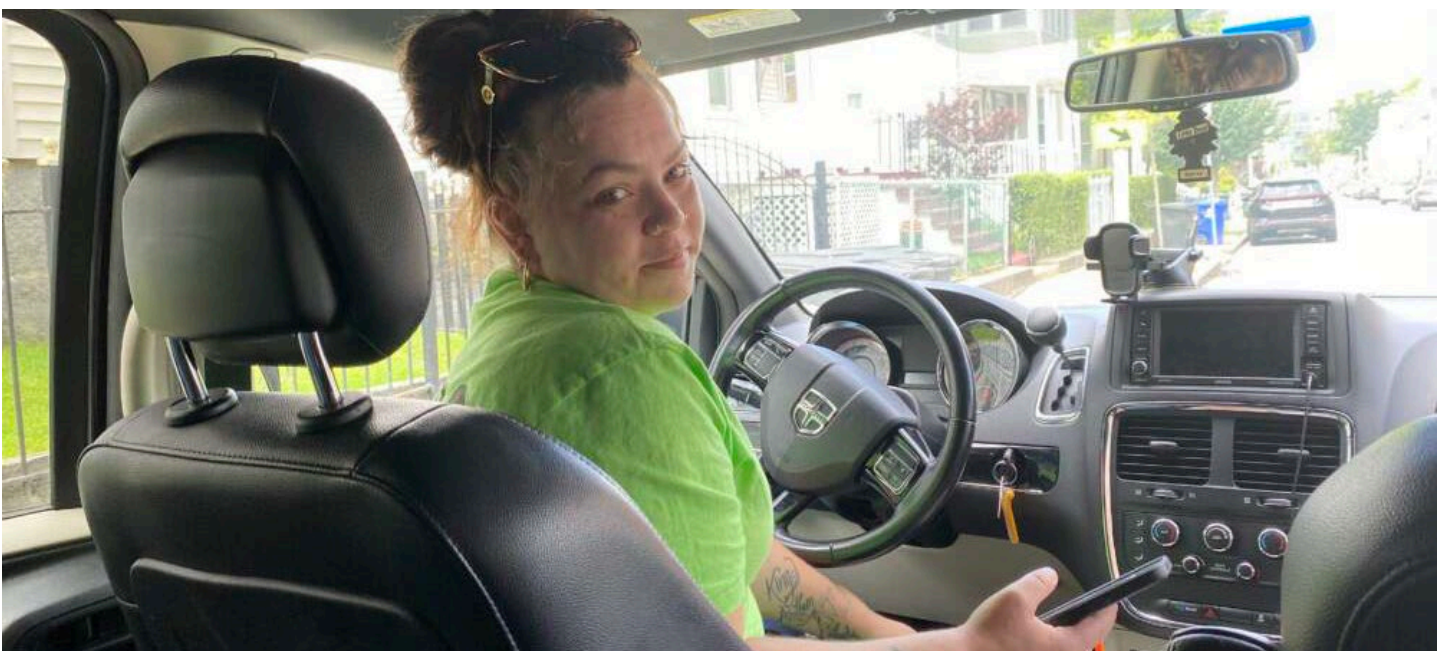
The group now serves about 300 women statewide. Most have either been victims of violence or are offenders, and many have been involved with the state's child custody agency, the Department of Children and Families. About 80% of the women in the program are mothers.

Felicia Corrado is a case manager in the program and works with about 21 young women. The 34-year-old is a survivor of sex trafficking herself, who said she has overcome many obstacles in her life.

"I started doing drugs very, very young. I was introduced to crack cocaine at 15 years old," she said. "I prostituted for like five years. I had pimps. I did like five months in jail."

Corrado has two children who were removed from her custody twice. The second time, she said, she sobered up. That was eight years ago.

She now spends most days on the road, visiting the women and helping with everything from navigating legal issues to teaching therapeutic skills for coping with difficult emotions. Corrado said untreated complex trauma can keep women in "survival mode" and perpetuate a cycle of violence. Yet, she said, many traumatized young women are worried that if they seek mental health help, they could risk losing custody of their children.



Felicia Corrado, a youth worker for Roca Boston, spends most of her days on the road going to visit her clients, who are all young women. (Deborah Becker/WBUR)

"I work with young women from the ages of 16 to 24 who are involved with courts, DCF, generally high-risk women," Corrado said. For a lot of these women, "we're they're only support system."

She said her own lived experience can help in connecting with the women.

"A lot of times you can kind of see them relax and feel like they're in company of somebody who's not going to judge them," Corrado said.

On a recent weekday, Corrado went to visit 20-year old Natasha Silva, a young mother referred to Roca by her older sister, who also is a participant. The sisters grew up in DCF custody and now live with their grandmother and their children in Dorchester.

Corrado is helping Silva start a landscaping job through Roca's transitional employment program, which will allow her to work part time and offers extra flexibility for things like scheduling child care. The job is meant to be an on-ramp to full time employment. Silva was eager to start, even if she hesitated for a moment when Corrado said she'd pick her up at about 6:30 a.m. the following Monday, to be on time for her first day.

"I still want to do it because I'm getting money too, so I'm excited for that," Silva said to Corrado. "I'll be up because I really do want to get on this."

Corrado offered to help her secure a child care voucher for Silva's two-year-old son. While being a mom makes it harder to have a job, Silva said her son also motivates her to put Corrado's therapeutic emotional training tools to use.

"If I get angry, I think about my son," Silva said. "Like, 'oh, so if I do that, then it might make me in jeopardy.' " Instead of reacting and taking rash action when she's emotionally overwhelmed, Silva pauses and reflects. "I'd rather protect me and my family instead of doing something that would break up my family."

Roca spends about \$4 million a year working with women in Massachusetts like Silva, much of that coming from the state and private grants and donations. Bhala said the program saves money by helping women change their lives, compared with the cost of worst-case scenarios, such as incarceration. She estimates that one year of incarceration is about five times more expensive than the cost of one year of Roca programming.

"The aggregate lifetime costs for both the loss of them not touching systems like education, employment, and for the cost of them touching things like the child welfare system, the

criminal justice system, and all the other benefits programs, it can cost well over a million dollars over a young family's lifetime," Bhala said.

A Tufts University review of Roca from 2018-2023 found that 97% of the women involved in the program for at least two years had no new arrests. That's despite almost half of the women having a prior arrest record.

Tufts also found young women enrolled in the program for at least one year showed significant reductions in PTSD and depression, as well as reductions in substance use and relationship violence.

"When we think about equity and equality, this is a group that's left out," Bhala said. "They're our most vulnerable citizens of this city, of this state. It's a privilege for us to work with them."

This segment aired on September 10, 2024.



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