

Many at-risk, young, pregnant women saved from spiraling by Roca, Tufts report says

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Roca, a violence prevention program, has offices at 29 School St. in Springfield. Tufts University researchers recently reported favorable results from a study of a cohort of Roca clients: young, at-risk pregnant women. (Hoang 'Leon' Nguyen / The Republican, File)

BOSTON — When a friend introduced Nyajea to Roca, a violence intervention program, she wasn't interested.

“I didn't want anything to do with any programs,” she said at an event Roca held on Tuesday at the State House. Nyajea, 22, did not disclose her last name at the event. “I'd had enough as a child being removed from my parents' custody, going into group homes and then running away. ... But my friend knew I was not in a healthy relationship and would need help.”

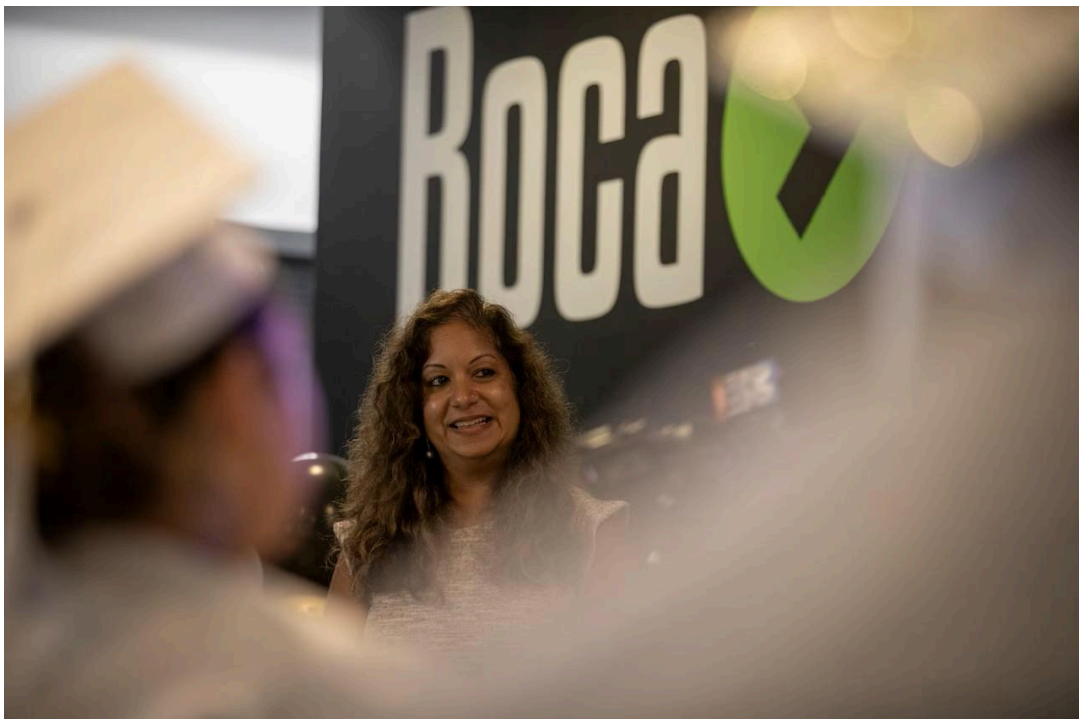
After she lost custody of her son, she decided to go to Roca in Springfield to better her life. It wasn't easy, especially after her second child, a daughter, was taken by the Department of Children and Families, but she stuck with the program.

"Now I'm in a transitional housing program," she said. "My daughter will be home on Friday, and I'm getting my life together, and things are coming into place for me and my family."

At the event Tuesday, Roca released an evaluation completed by Tufts University's Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research that looks at Roca's program for young mothers who have experienced acute trauma.

The two-year pilot program received state funding and partnered with the Office of the Child Advocate. At several locations in the state, it provides resources like job readiness training and therapeutic skills.

Roca called the change in the women "remarkable."



Roca Executive Vice President Sunindiya Bhalla speaks to the graduates of a Roca intervention program for high-risk young mothers and women on Aug. 13. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)

“We teach cognitive behavioral skills to help them manage the chronic stress and survival mode they’ve lived in for far too long, and begin building the safety and stability they need,” Sunindiya Bhalla, Roca’s executive vice president, said at Tuesday’s briefing. In the two-year period, the project worked with 381 women, about a third of whom live in the Springfield area. About two-thirds of the women experienced high levels of trauma, and had involvement with the courts and child welfare system, according to the evaluation.

After joining the Roca program, many saw decreases in depression (42%), PTSD (29%), domestic violence (20%), and emotional dysregulation (18%); the evaluation found. Arraignments declined by about 60%.

“We’ve learned a lot about the young women ROCA serves and how the program shifts their trajectories and changes their lives,” said Rebecca Fauth, co-director of the Tufts’ research group, on Tuesday.

Fauth’s team also looked at state data for about 170 participants who allowed their information to be shared and found that after joining Roca, more people signed up for aid programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

In the last two years, the program also experienced setbacks. One young woman, Jessiah Mercado, 20, and her infant son were [shot and killed](#) in November 2024 in Hartford, Connecticut.

“We remember Jessiah for her fierce love for her sons,” Bhalla said Tuesday, “her ongoing determination to escape violence and the encouragement she gave others struggling to become the mothers they wish to be.”

In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice this spring [terminated a grant](#) that brought in about \$1 million to the women’s program in Western Massachusetts. In Springfield, the women’s program “no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities,” the DOJ wrote in its grant cancellation letter.

For Nyajea, the program changed her life, she said Tuesday.

“I can’t thank them enough for helping me and my family and helping me grow into the person that I deserve to be, and that I never thought that I could be,” she said.

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