

North Dakota Youth Trafficking Crisis: Challenges and Collaborative Solutions

Analyzing the rise in trafficked youths at Home on the Range, showcasing unique equine therapy and legislative efforts for specialized youth services.



Home on the Range Rhythmic Ride is NDSU Doctoral student dissertation research project started in 2022 it allows young women to listen to music while riding the horse, trying to center themselves, and dealing with a sometimes stubborn animal, the young women inadvertently learn how to trust and make better decisions "Home on the Range Rhythmic Ride" is a research project for doctoral students at NDSU, started in 2022. It allows young women to listen to music while riding a horse, helping them center themselves and deal with the challenges of working with a sometimes stubborn animal. Through this experience, the young women learn how to develop trust and make better decisions. Manuel Holguin JR / The Dickinson Press

SENTINEL BUTTE, ND — Home on the Range received a call from the state of North Dakota requesting that they take a 15-year-old girl into their custody. The minor had been abandoned at a Las Vegas gas station, high on methamphetamine, after her 30-something-year-old felon "boyfriend" manipulated her with drugs and a place to stay.

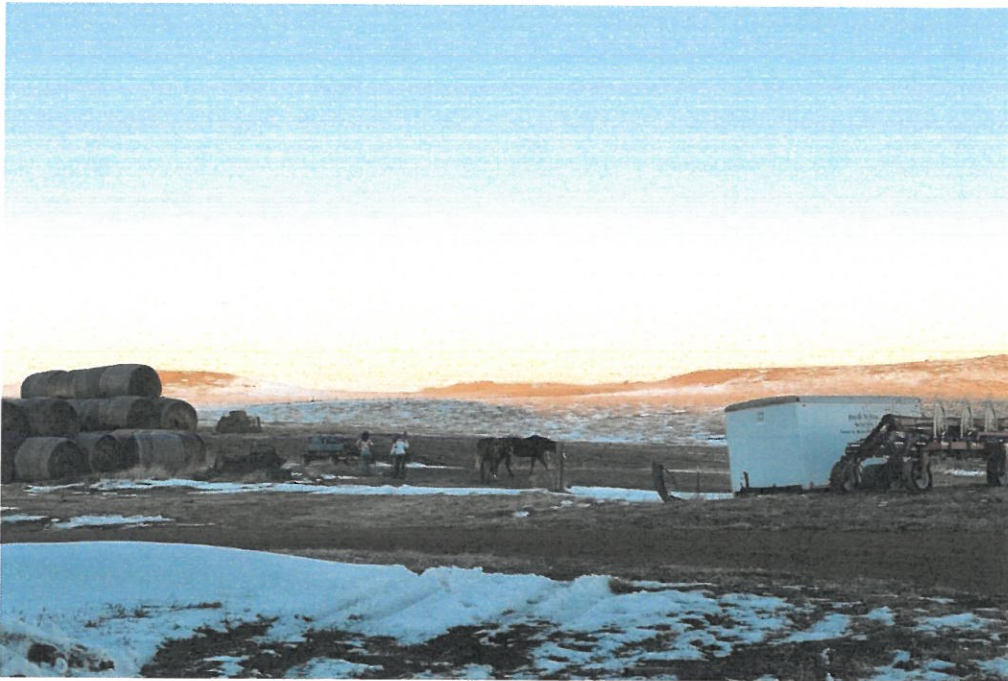
Eventually he decided he was done with her.

Officials in Nevada reached out to the State of North Dakota, after multiple desperate attempts to reunite the girl, whom we'll call Lucy for her safety, with her parents. Eventually, North Dakota made the decisive move to bring her back to the state and remand her into the embrace of Home on the Range, where unwavering support awaited her.

Young girls who have been sexually trafficked or exploited, like Lucy, are far from outliers...Instead they have become a bleak norm for HOTR.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Laura Feldmann, executive director of Home on the Range, explained how the tides have turned with the female population they intake. "There's been a huge political shift in how people think about residential care. We used to get kids who had drug and alcohol issues or family issues, those kinds of things," Feldmann said. "And now the kids that we're seeing in the last four years are really in the deeper-end."



Home On The Range is a fully functional ranch that also serves as a therapeutic center for children. The facility includes cattle and equipment that children work with, teaching them about responsibility and work ethic. Home On The Range offers education, therapy, spiritual guidance, as well as recreational and work activities. The facility is licensed to care for 36 boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 19.

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In 2022, 30 of the 38 female residents admitted into HOTR had been trafficked or exploited in some way. The figure has remained constant since 2019, with a total of 33 female residents admitted, 23 of whom have been identified as victims of trafficking or exploitation. Since 2019, HOTR estimated a total of 122 individuals suspected or identified as victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking have made their way into the care of the facility.

A more extensive report by the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force revealed that from 2015 until June 2021, 283 human trafficking cases were investigated involving 760 victims. Of these cases, 90% were related to sex trafficking, 7% to labor trafficking and 3% to both.

Despite these numbers however, the increase in minors that have been identified as trafficked or exploited at HOTR does not equate to a decrease in children with other issues. The organization continues to take in children with drug issues, family conflicts, school matters, autism and suicidal ideation or attempts.

The organization is used to change, and they have learned to adapt quickly.

Before 2018, Home on the Range used to receive 80% of its funding from the state. However, the current situation is different as only 53% of the funds come from the state. Therefore, Home on the Range needs to raise funds for the remaining 47% of its finances. As a result, some of the equipment they use, including boots, have to be reused by youths.

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When the facilities originally opened its doors, HOTR was an all-boys catholic home. Today they are a co-ed therapist and working ranch, relying on a variety of different methods to work with the kids — including equestrian therapy.

"Home of the Range has always had horses. It's always been a working cattle ranch," Feldmann said. "So our kids were doing animal-assisted therapy before Home on the Range even knew what they where doing."



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PARTNERSHIPS AND REAL-WORLD SOLUTIONS

In March 2023, HOTR began collaborating with North Dakota State University (NDSU) to integrate an equine therapy program using the horses already gracing their fully operational ranch.

This decision followed project planning sessions with NDSU, aiming to infuse the therapeutic benefits of the equine component into their innovative [Ending The Game](#) curriculum, a survivor-written, peer-reviewed curriculum in the realm of human trafficking.

With ten core lessons and an evidence-driven approach, it is trusted in over 250 facilities — impacting countless survivors annually.

The equine program's roots trace back to a collaborative research project in 2015, echoing the success of earlier initiatives, such as the canine program in 2015 and the Rhythmic Ride, a groundbreaking NDSU Doctoral dissertation research project in 2022 which is still in practice at the ranch.



A young girl journals next to her horse following a therapeutic riding session. A young girl is journaling next to her horse after a therapeutic riding session.

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This dynamic fusion of academic research and hands-on therapy at HOTR exemplifies their commitment to providing healing opportunities for troubled youth through the unique synergy of ranch life and tailored programs.

Feldmann told the story about a girl who was given four index cards and asked to write about her struggles or challenges. She taped them to the legs of a paint horse named Bronco.

The girl, inexperienced with horses, was tasked with cleaning Bronco's hooves, a metaphor to teach her to make independent decisions.

"If they always look for people outside of themselves to answer, they're never growing the part of them that can make their own decisions," said Feldmann.

As the young girl nervously worked on each hoof, she reflected on the personal issues written on the cards. The first hoof, labeled "Behavior," represented her efforts to improve her conduct. The second, "Attitude," was about her working on her tendency to be sarcastic.

The third hoof would be the most challenging, labeled "Drugs and Alcohol." The young girl struggled to groom the hoof as Bronco insistently and stubbornly pulled his hoof away anytime the girl attempted picked it up — mirroring the pre-teens own battle with sobriety and relapse.

"She's got tears in her eyes and she said, 'he's, he's just like me I get sober, and I relapse. Over and over again.' And she bends back down, and she gets after that foot. And eventually, she gets it clean," said Feldmann.

The final hoof, marked with "Grief and Loss," was the most emotional. As she attempted to clean it, she revealed a deep-seated pain from losing five family members and friends to drugs and alcohol, something she had never openly discussed.

"They've died, and I've never talked about it," said the young girl.

"Well, what are you going to do if that hoof doesn't get clean? What's going to happen to Bronco?" asked Feldmann

"He'll die. He'll get something in there, and he'll die," she replied

"So what are you going to do?" Feldmann questioned.

"I'm going to get it clean," the girl cried.

For Feldmann, moments like this showcased that animal therapy worked and how HOCR would prefer to measure success.

RED TAPE AND CHALLENGES

However, metrics will show a different story as the number of readmission rates per year, which used to dwell in the single digits, has doubled and "88% of female repeat admissions were those that were sexually exploited and or trafficked."

"These kids are coming back one time, two times, three times, up to four times," Feldmann told the [Human Services Committee](#) during testimony for Senate Bill 2341 on Feb 13, 2023.



Home on the Range is located at 16351 I-94 Sentinel Butte, ND 58654
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Feldmann's testimony was in support of amending the verbiage and century code. This modification would enable North Dakota to integrate an option under the Family First Prevention Services Act, facilitating the establishment of a dedicated residential program tailored for sexually exploited and trafficked youth.

"The optimal research suggests 18-24 months of residential treatment for these youth. However, due to QRTP parameters, our average length of stay for the past year has been just under 3 months."

According to the qualified residential treatment program guidelines or QRTP, a foster child aged 13 and older should not exceed 12 consecutive months or 18 non-consecutive months in a QRTP. The limit for foster children aged 12 and younger is not more than 6 consecutive months.

Kelsey Bless, the Licensing Unit Administrator for Children and Family Services, highlighted recent shifts in child welfare practices. She pointed out a significant change from the past, where children often spent up to two years in residential settings. "Family First doesn't allow for that anymore. They say kids do better in a family setting," Bless explained, emphasizing the preference for family-oriented care over institutional settings.

North Dakota has embraced this approach, aligning with the Family First policy's emphasis on family-centric care. Bless acknowledged the importance of organizations like Home on the Range but stressed their role as part of a broader care continuum rather than long-term solutions. "They are a very viable good option, but they're not the long term solution for permanency," she said.

Bless also reflected on the consensus within the community and among childcare professionals about the importance of family environments for children. "But we agree with the federal government that

kids don't belong in congregate care for months and months. They belong in a family home community," she concluded, highlighting a shift towards supporting children in family homes rather than in institutional care for extended periods.



Horses comfortable living on the open range
Manuel Holguin JR / The Dickinson Press

However, the research cited by Feldmann all led to the same conclusion. Feldmann explained, "Due to the psychological impact on these young girls, it's akin to brainwashing. Building trust with them takes a significant amount of time, and therapy without that trust is ineffective—it's a lengthy process."

Spending time with these young individuals was essential for Feldmann. It played a vital role in efforts to reverse the effects of traumatic stress on their brains. This dedicated time would allow HOTR to work towards promoting healing and addressing the challenges posed by traumatic experiences, fostering a positive impact on their overall well-being.

The bill did not secure the necessary votes with 15 yeas and 75 nays. Although it passed the Senate, the House reduced it to a research study to assess whether there was enough data to initiate a program of this nature.

Between 2023 and 2024, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) set to conduct a comprehensive examination and implementation process, including partnership with various stakeholders, to establish a standardized framework for youth services aimed at children who have been affected or are at risk of being impacted by human trafficking, with a specific focus on residential treatment.

As part of this initiative, the DHHS will collaborate with key stakeholders, including the Child and Family Services section of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of the Attorney General, and the [Human Trafficking Task Force](#) .

To ensure transparency and accountability, the DHHS must present its findings and recommendations to the Legislative Management by July 1, 2024.

HITTING THE RESET BUTTON

Meanwhile, Feldmann and the HOTR staff persist in their efforts to assist these youths, addressing a spectrum of issues among them.

Lucy successfully completed two GED tests during her stay at HOTR, earning recognition as an inspirational figure in her discharge documents. She participated in a prayer group and a development group.

Lucy endeavored to reestablish a connection with her roots.

Redemption stories like hers illustrates the potential for assistance in steering youth toward self-sufficiency, informed decision-making and staying clear of trouble.

Nonetheless, the stark reality persists that cases akin to Lucy's are unfolding in North Dakota daily, whether perceptible or not.

Without effective collaboration between government entities and facilities like HOTR, the cycle of trafficking and exploitation of minors, as well as the challenges associated with their treatment, remains unchanged.



A young woman staying at Home on the Range tugged on her horse, but had a successful ride despite its resistance.

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