

Member Agency Spotlight

FREEDOM HOUSE

Domestic & Sexual Violence Services

Programs have been collecting big ideas for years, experiencing time and time again that they do not have the funding to put their plans into action. Now that there is an additional \$50 million of IDHS funding allocated to programs statewide, it may be challenging to switch mindsets. Where do we start? How long will this funding be available? What needs and ideas should we prioritize?

While it can be challenging to answer these questions, domestic violence programs are resilient and capable of turning this funding increase into impactful, positive changes for survivors. Freedom House is one program that has chosen to move full steam ahead in making their organizational and community dreams a reality.

Emily Hinrichsen, ICADV's Director of Training, met with Michael Zerneck and Amber Killian to discuss the efforts Freedom House has been making to improve services to survivors. Zerneck is the Executive Director of Freedom House, and Killian is the Domestic Violence Program Manager. The organization's main office and shelter is located in Princeton, Illinois. They have had satellite offices in Kewanee and Cambridge for quite some time, and increased IDHS funds and two six-figure grants from private foundations have made it possible to open satellite offices in Geneseo, which is already operating, and the Henry/Lacon area.

In addition to opening two new satellite offices, Freedom House has been able to create six new staff jobs. They created a new position for a second accounting associate, which has already been filled. They have also created a second outreach specialist position to focus solely on domestic violence, as well as an advocate supervisor position, a third legal advocate slot, and two positions for licensed therapists. The organization hopes to better support survivors experiencing mental health issues or substance use now that they will have licensed therapists on staff. There are often long waiting lists at other organizations that offer mental health/counseling services, so Freedom House is excited to provide those services to survivors much sooner.

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On top of creating brand-new positions at the organization, Freedom House has been able to restructure the way they operate their shelter and hotline. Until recently, they only had the capacity to have one person working in shelter per shift. They had front office advocates who primarily answered hotline calls, filed, and entered InfoNet data, and a shelter advocate who handled case management. Front office advocates frequently had to adapt and work in shelter to cover shifts or provide assistance to other staff. Ultimately, they did not have the title and pay of a shelter advocate, but they were doing many of the same tasks and craved the client interactions received while working in shelter.

Once the new fiscal year started (July 2022), all domestic violence advocates are expected to answer hotline calls and manage one or two families in shelter at a time. Since each advocate is getting paid for the work they are ultimately doing, staff are experiencing less burnout. Staff who work third shift will still focus on data entry and hotline calls during their shifts. The new Advocate Supervisor position gave the individual a much-desired increase in responsibility and took some responsibilities off Killian's plate.

The foundation grants have enabled the agency to purchase billboard space in Geneseo and Lacon, launch a huge social media campaign, and place 30- and 60-second client testimonial advertisements on broadcast and public television. The agency also placed these spots as non-skippable ads on streaming services.

Zerneck and Killian emphasized how proud they were of the outreach team, who were able to secure the large private donations by building relationships and speaking up for what was needed. Zerneck and Killian also expressed how proud they are of Freedom House staff as a collective. All ideas for new positions and restructuring came directly from staff, and their confidence in each other and the organization is why Freedom House has been able to make such big moves.

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