

Inside the lifeline for trafficked women at Mass. and Cass

By **Claire Thornton** Globe Staff, Updated August 13, 2026, 5:30 a.m.



Peer advocate Sandra Andrade (left) and clinical psychologist Abigail Judge stood under the street signs for Massachusetts

Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard, where they run a safe space for women who are experiencing commercial sexual exploitation. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF/BOSTON GLOBE

Every Tuesday and Friday, as the sun sets on the intersection known as Mass. and Cass, a psychologist and a court counselor give periwinkle wristbands with contact information to women living on the streets.

The pair run a small nonprofit for unhoused, trafficked women who have opioid use disorder, an often overlooked but vulnerable population among Boston's several thousand homeless residents. Their intertwined struggles of commercial sexual exploitation and substance use mean they can fall through the cracks of many social services intended to help.

"When you bounce around from being homeless, to being in treatment, maybe incarceration and being back on the street, you don't have any stability," sex trafficking survivor Ann McKenzie, 39, said.

"But with Abby, she was my one constant person for nine years that I could depend on," McKenzie said, referring to Abigail Judge, a clinical and forensic psychologist who cofounded the nonprofit, the [Boston Human Exploitation Advocacy Team](#), or HEAT.

Other groups designed to support housing needs and substance use recovery oftentimes don't address trauma from sex trafficking, advocates said. Meanwhile, organizations helping trafficking victims frequently don't have the bandwidth to address drug use, according to social workers.

Flying under the radar of clinics meant to help homeless Bostonians, unhoused women who are trafficked and use opioids, as was the case for McKenzie, are exposed to overdose risks and physical violence from abusers. Since 2024, nine women

trafficked around Mass. and Cass died from homicide or overdose, according to data collected by HEAT.

The intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard has long been a hub for sex trafficking because unhoused people who use drugs there are in survival mode, said Katie Koh, a street psychiatrist with Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program.

“A lot of people use drugs in the first place to cope with the adversity and pain they’ve experienced throughout their life, and their addiction can lead them to make decisions they wouldn’t make in the absence of using substances,” Koh said.

Women who use intravenous opioids at Mass. and Cass become targeted by traffickers who exploit their basic needs for shelter, substances, and food. Victims who work with HEAT said they’ve also used fentanyl and heroin to numb the trauma of being sexually exploited.



Ann McKenzie, 39, held a wristband with the names of some of the sexually exploited women who have died from overdoses or homicide since 2024. The Boston Human Exploitation Advocacy Team's private cellphone numbers are on the inside of the bracelet so women can call at any hour if they need help. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Without safe housing and facing criminalization and stigma surrounding their drug use and the commercial sex trade, the women become trapped in a coercive web, said Jessica Loftus, a clinical social worker who helps trafficked women at two Boston hospitals.

“When you have a criminal history and you have really complex medical and mental health needs, you get ruled out of accessing services, which perpetuates the problem and prevents you from getting to a place where stabilization is possible,” Loftus said.

Judge and Sandra Andrade, a Roxbury District Court [senior peer advocate](#), launched

HEAT in 2020 after working at a Massachusetts General Hospital clinic helping women like McKenzie. After they realized that only a sliver of women from Mass. and Cass checked in, they took their work to the streets. Via sidewalk outreach, they invite women to HEAT's nighttime safe space, called "the spot," which feels like a cozy, underground bunker.

Relying mostly on grant funding, including a recent anti-trafficking grant from FIFA, Judge provides victims with psychotherapy, and Andrade navigates them through legal obstacles.

"The 'spot' isn't only temporary respite and safety, it's a community based on what I know from a clinical perspective about trauma recovery and what Sandra knows in her bones from lived experience," said Judge, who has remained on the faculty at MGH.

When a woman calls the phone numbers on her wristband, Judge and Andrade accompany her to the hospital in the middle of the night, meet her at the police station, or shepherd her through a court hearing.

"I go to court with them, because a lot of them don't like to walk in, there's a lot of anxiety, or fear of [withdrawal] because they're in active addiction," Andrade, 46, said.

When the Boston Police Department Human Trafficking Unit refers victims to resource groups, HEAT is their first call, according to Sergeant Detective Marc Sullivan. Since 2024, the unit has sent more than 120 victims to Judge and Andrade.

South End residents formed a [group](#) to build community buy-in for HEAT, which has quickly become Boston's most effective advocate for commercial sexual exploitation victims, said Jim O'Connell, founder of Boston Health Care for the Homeless.



Peer advocate Sandra Andrade (left) and Abigail Judge, a clinical psychologist, are cofounders of Boston HEAT. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF/BOSTON GLOBE

“We knew about the drug trade, but we were not aware of how many people were really being trafficked,” O’Connell said. “What Abigail and Sandra did on Mass. and Cass quietly and under the radar was really astonishing.”

Like many women who work with HEAT, McKenzie said she was first trafficked as a teenager, at age 15, after meeting the son of a local “pimp” in downtown Boston.

For the next 15 years, McKenzie said life was a blur of paid “dates,” physical abuse, and a “full-blown” drug addiction.

She met Judge at MGH in 2017 while receiving treatment for endocarditis, an

infection of the heart, which she suffered from using intravenous drugs.

“I’d probably be dead if it wasn’t for Abby,” McKenzie, 39, said in an interview.

Now, McKenzie is on Sublocade treatment and other medications for PTSD.

“Abby has been the most essential part of my health care,” said McKenzie, who lives in Arlington with her father and son. “With the trauma and PTSD, it’s really hard to not live in the past, but Abby’s helped me focus on the present.”

Another woman who accesses HEAT’s resources said in a written testimonial filed to city officials last year that she was first sexually trafficked as a child by her own mother.

“The amount of support and understanding I feel from Abigail and her team is something I have never experienced in my life,” wrote the woman, who signed her initials, “SM.”

Women such as SM can also find support at Boston hospitals that have social workers trained to help.



McKenzie posed for a portrait on July 31. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

But many victims avoid health care settings, said Amy Farrell, director of Northeastern University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Women describe feeling a “very static” underlying stigma from doctors and nurses, she said.

“They are often treated as people who are not worth helping or somehow responsible for their own victimization,” Farrell said.

Social workers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Brigham & Women's Hospital can help, usually when a patient checks in for more than one day.

“I think we do, unfortunately, miss folks who come through the emergency department,” said Loftus, the clinical social worker.

When many women return to the streets after a medical crisis, they find themselves in the situations that landed them in the hospital.

But on Tuesday and Friday nights, women who work with HEAT come inside at “the spot,” which has an address that isn’t listed online.

The space has a large dining table, a soft couch, a kitchen, and a clothes closet. Women can shower and get daily essentials such as deodorant, toothpaste, and hair ties.

During recent evenings, women laughed as they ate watermelon cubes, green grapes, and frosted sugar cookies while blasting hip-hop music on their phones.

When they’re with Andrade and Judge, women are surrounded by pastel portraits painted by a former client who is now an accomplished artist. They vent about drama that’s unfolded on the streets and reflect on their relationships, both good and bad, as well as deaths in the community.

Andrade and Judge are on track to help more women this year than last, to expand weekly hours at “the spot,” and to acquire a mobile van. They hired a third staff member in June.

“People seem to help women a lot when they’re clean, but what about when they’re actually going through things?” Andrade said. “Our women sustain being clean and being in housing because they have support now, when things are really shady.”

Claire Thornton can be reached at claire.thornton@globe.com. Follow Claire on X [@claire_thornto](https://twitter.com/claire_thornto).

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