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By Electronic Mail
Board of Directors
SafeHouse Center

Re: Investigation Findings

Dear SafeHouse Center Board of Directors,

At your request, I prepared this high-level summary of the investigation findings. By way of background, on July 31, 2021, a blog written by P.D. Lesko about SafeHouse Center was posted in the Ann Arbor Independent local newspaper, "Staff and Clients Allege SafeHouse Center is Mismanaged and a 'Racist, Toxic' Environment."¹ The first sentence of the blog states, "In February of 2021, SafeHouse Center clients, staff and interns, present and past, came forward to allege that under Executive Director Barbara Niess-May, who has been at the helm since 2002, a 'toxic racial divide' exists between management, low-paid staff, and survivors...." The Ann Arbor Independent subsequently published additional blog articles about SafeHouse throughout the next few months.

On October 6, 2021, you retained Hartrick Employment Law to conduct an independent and impartial investigation of the issues raised in the blogs. My contact information was widely shared on social media, with current staff, and with former staff and "survivors."² Those interviewed were encouraged to share my contact information with other former staff and survivors. Free rein was provided to conduct interviews of current and former staff and interns, and current and former survivors. It was agreed the identity of all witnesses would be kept confidential and anonymous given the allegations of retaliation referenced in the blogs. Every witness was asked, "Is SafeHouse Center mismanaged, and is there a culture of racism and retaliation towards those who work for SafeHouse, and those who are served by the SafeHouse?"

I was in communication with forty-two people as potential witnesses for the investigation. Witness interviews occurred during the ten-week period from October 11th to December 18th, the date the last witness was interviewed. Every witness who contacted me was interviewed, apart from two former employees who reached out after interviews for former employees were closed on December 7, 2021 (contact dates were December 17th and 31st). I initiated contact with thirteen witnesses who were believed to have information pertinent to the investigation. One current and one former employee failed to respond to several attempts for an interview. One former shelter resident had a non-working telephone number and failed to respond to several attempts by email to schedule her interview.

¹ Article can be accessed online at <https://www.a2independent.com/2021/07/31/staff-and-clients-allege-safehouse-center-is-mismanaged-and-a-racist-toxic-environment/>.

² "Survivor ... mean[s] the person in the relationship who is being hit, beaten, abused, sexually assaulted, raped, and controlled. The legal system uses the word victim.... [T]he word survivor is used because it emphasizes the fact that those who have survived sexual assault and domestic violence are strong, courageous people who have lived through terrible attacks." See Safe House Center Handbook for Survivors of Domestic Violence at page 3. "Resident" is a survivor who stays overnight in the SafeHouse temporary emergency shelter.

Further breakdown of the forty-two individuals includes twenty-one witnesses who are current employees, fourteen witnesses who are former employees/interns, and seven witnesses who are former shelter residents. Twenty-three witnesses self-identify as Caucasian; twelve as African American; six as either bi-racial (Caucasian and African American), Arabic/Middle Eastern, or Hispanic; and one as unknown (the proposed witness was not interviewed).

The investigation focused on breaking down the issues raised in the investigation and making reasoned findings of fact based on the “preponderance of the evidence.” That evidence included witness interviews, as well as documents and information provided by SafeHouse and witnesses. The preponderance of the evidence standard provides, after weighing all the evidence, the investigator makes reasoned findings of fact in good faith, more likely than not, an allegation did (or did not) occur.

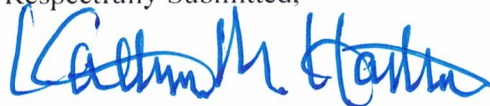
The preponderance of the evidence supports the finding there have been lapses of SafeHouse Center management in the areas of human resources, communications, and safety. While management expressed good intentions to lead during undeniably challenging times, the preponderance of the evidence supports the finding the concerns associated with human resources and communications predated the pandemic. The preponderance of the evidence supports the finding senior management could have been better at listening to, understanding, and responding to perspectives beyond those of the management team. The preponderance of the evidence supports the finding, more likely than not, there were instances where SafeHouse leadership made managerial decisions without a full appreciation and understanding of staff and shelter resident concerns.

In July, August, and early September 2021, actions taken by SafeHouse management further contributed to staff and shelter resident distrust in leadership, and perceptions of racism and retaliation. The preponderance of the evidence supports the finding that despite those perceptions, more likely than not, actions were not taken on a racially discriminatory basis. The breakdown in communications further supports the findings of fact that some staff and shelter residents reasonably interpreted certain decisions and actions as retaliatory towards those expressing concerns. While the concerns expressed by several witnesses touched on retaliation and racism, the preponderance of the evidence failed to substantiate the finding SafeHouse has a “culture” of racism and retaliation towards those who work for SafeHouse, and those who are served by the SafeHouse shelter. It is further acknowledged SafeHouse provides a variety of services, in addition to the temporary emergency shelter services, that have continued to be utilized by survivors and former shelter residents.

Last, but certainly not least, the investigation substantiated necessary actions to address and improve the physical condition of the SafeHouse shelter have begun. To regain trust, there is an opportunity for SafeHouse management to be more responsive to concerns that are expressed on a timely basis, and better communicate the basis for actions and decisions.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you on this investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,



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Founder & Principal
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