

## **Sex-Trafficked Children Are Victims, Not Criminals**

*No city, no town, no neighborhood immune*

No community in the state is immune from sex trafficking. Minnesota cities have been places of origin, transit, and destination for sex trafficking operations even before federal and state law defined the crime.

Especially heinous, sex trafficking of children is a problem of growing urgency. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children conservatively estimates that 100,000 children are exploited each year for prostitution in the U.S.

Children of any ethnicity, from any neighborhood, or of any color are potential targets. Social media makes it easy for pimps to recruit unsuspecting youth and “advertise” to johns, and shopping malls are popular recruitment venues.

Especially at risk are children who run away from home, like Amanda, “a little girl from northern Minnesota” whose story Minneapolis police detective Sgt. Grant Snyder described before the Minnesota legislature. He described finding Amanda, wearing only a dirty t-shirt and lying on a soiled mattress in a basement, being trafficked for sex.

Staggering, it likely takes a mere 48 hours after a runaway is on the street for that young person to trade her (or his) body for sex in order to get basic necessities, according to the Minnesota Attorney General.

The violent crime of sex trafficking often results in significant harm to the victim. Traffickers use manipulative and sophisticated grooming, breaking, and control tactics. They use violence or threats of violence against victims or their families.

Sex trafficking violates a range of fundamental human rights. Governments, including the United States and, by extension, the state of Minnesota, have committed to combat sex trafficking through a number of international treaties and protocols. These instruments set forth the government’s obligation to increase efforts to prosecute perpetrators, protect victims, and prevent future trafficking.

Minnesota has had no system in place to address the needs of child victims. The absence of an effective protection system left the juvenile delinquency system as the only—yet, wholly inadequate—response.

Change has begun.

Thanks to bi-partisan statewide support, landmark legislation known as No Wrong Door was passed by the Minnesota legislature this year. The leadership of Northeastern Minnesota legislators, law enforcement, and community organizations was a powerful force behind its passage.

The law and its partial funding is a step in the right direction, and a huge victory upon which Minnesota can build.

Now, child victims will be provided comprehensive services, including safe housing, trauma treatment, and medical and mental health care. The law provides training for law

enforcement and other front-line personnel, too. Also signed into law was a bill extending protection to all youth 17 years and younger.

Research reveals that for every \$1 of public cost, early intervention yields \$34 in benefit, according to research conducted in 2012 for the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center.

The new law is the product of a law enacted in 2011, Minnesota's Safe Harbor Act going into full effect in 2014, defining sex trafficked children as victims, *not* criminals.

As a result of Safe Harbor, The Advocates for Human Rights joined law enforcement, public health and social service professionals, and others from the Arrowhead Region and throughout the state to create a plan to meet the needs of sex trafficking's youngest victims. The result: No matter where a sexually exploited youth, or a youth at risk of sexual exploitation, seeks help—no matter which door knocked on—she will be met with a meaningful and life-changing response.

We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Arrowhead region and with people throughout the state to finish the work required to serve—and save—sex trafficked children.

*By Robin Phillips, executive director of The Advocates for Human Rights, a non-profit organization headquartered in Minneapolis, celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> year of working locally and globally to fight injustice, restore peace, save lives and build the human rights movement.*