

It's time to protect children who are victims of sex trafficking

Respond to them as victims, not criminals

"I'm in big trouble . . . I'm afraid I'm about to be killed," the terrified young girl cried out to the Twin Cities 911 operator. Sobbing, the teen begged for help, telling the operator a couple was forcing her to have sex with men to earn money she supposedly "owed" her captors.

Sex trafficking of children in the U.S. 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.

Minnesota has been a place of origin, transit, and destination for sex trafficking operations even before federal or state law defined the crime. A decade ago, the FBI identified the Twin Cities "as one of 13 cities with a large concentration of child prostitution enterprises."

This predatory and violent crime 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 their victims or their families.

Sex trafficking affects communities throughout the state, and anyone can become a victim. Children of any ethnicity, from any neighborhood, or of any color are potential targets. Today, social media's popularity makes it even easier for pimps to connect with and recruit unsuspecting youth.

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.

Currently, Minnesota has no system in place to address the needs of child victims. Trafficked youth fall largely outside of the purview of county child protection systems. The absence of an effective protection system ready to meet the needs of these children has left the juvenile delinquency system as the only response. This is wholly inadequate to meet their needs and to keep them safe.

Change is at hand.

No Wrong Door, landmark legislation now before the Minnesota Senate and House, would provide child victims with much-needed comprehensive services, such as safe housing, trauma treatment, and medical and mental health care. The bill provides training for law enforcement and other front-line personnel.

The No Wrong Door legislation is the product of a directive in Minnesota's Safe Harbor Act, a law enacted in 2011 and set to go into full effect in 2014. At its core, the Safe Harbor Act defined sex trafficked children as victims under state law, *not* criminals.

The Act also directed Minnesota's Commissioner of Public Safety and a broad coalition of stakeholders to develop a victim-centered response. The Advocates for Human Rights joined prosecutors, public defenders, judges, public safety officials, public health professionals, child protection workers, and service providers from around the state to create a plan to meet the needs of sex trafficking's youngest victims. The result fulfills the coalition's vision: No matter where a sexually exploited youth or a youth at risk of sexual exploitation seeks help—no matter which door she knocks on—she will be met with a response that is meaningful and life-changing.

The No Wrong Door legislation makes fiscal sense. Research reveals that for every \$1 of public cost, early intervention yields \$34 in benefit, according to a cost benefit analysis conducted in 2012 for the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center by Indiana State University and the University of Minnesota.

Protect children, like the teen who made the gut-wrenching 911 call. Contact your state senator and representative and urge them to support No Wrong Door legislation, Senate File 385 and House File 485.

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