

Los Angeles Times

Rescued child prostitutes not receiving help

The FBI saved more than 50 in an October crackdown, but experts say the victims need intensive residential treatment, which they aren't getting. Such help is in scant supply.

By Joe Markman

December 8, 2009

Reporting from Washington - More than a month after the FBI announced it had rescued 52 children from "sexual slavery" in a nationwide crackdown on child prostitution, none of the victims is receiving the help experts say is necessary to overcome such trauma and rejoin society.

At least one, a 15-year-old Sacramento girl held on an unrelated charge, remains in a juvenile detention center, according to a Los Angeles Times check of the children's situations. Others have been sent home or into foster care.

The victims need intensive residential treatment, experts say, and only three such programs exist in the country.

Richard Estes, a social policy professor at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert on child sexual exploitation, said the "best fighting chance" for victims is "24/7 residential care for a long period of time."

"This is not a quick-fix situation," he said. "It really is a rebuilding and remolding of personality and character."

Many victims are abused long before they are lured into the sex trade, Estes said. Their symptoms often include guilt, anxiety and inappropriate sexual behavior.

"Most of the girls that have run away and are on the streets have run away because of sexual abuse," he said.

Lois Lee, founder of a 24-bed Los Angeles shelter called Children of the Night, sees the problems firsthand.

"When America's child prostitutes are identified by the FBI or police, they are incarcerated for whatever reason possible, whether it be an unrelated crime or 'material witness hold,' " she said.

"Then they are dumped back in the dysfunctional home, ill-equipped group home or foster care, and [often] disappear back into the underground of prostitution with no voice."

Ian McCaleb, a spokesman for the Justice Department, said the government "uses a victim-centered approach that provides victims with the services they need in order to recover and to fully participate in the criminal justice process."

But some of the local law enforcement officials who worked with the FBI on the October bust echoed Lee's comments. Child victims are often sent home or to foster families after moving through juvenile court, the officials said.

For instance, six children ages 10 to 17 rescued in Toledo, Ohio, were processed through the local children services bureau before ending up in a nonresidential counseling program, Toledo Police Det. Peter Schwartz said.

Experts underscore that sex-trafficking victims struggle to find the care they need once they escape from an industry that may involve at least 100,000 children in the U.S.

Donna M. Hughes, a women's studies professor at the University of Rhode Island who has researched U.S. sex trafficking, argues that domestic victims are shortchanged by the attention authorities and advocacy groups give to the illegal importation of foreign prostitutes.

"We need more treatment programs," Hughes said. "There are a number of different programs that have existed for years, but they need more support."

Lisa Goldblatt Grace, who consulted on a 2007 study for the Health and Human Services Department, said child victims "lack a safe, stable place to live, and that's part of what made them vulnerable to begin with."

Grace is program director of the My Life My Choice Project, a nonprofit focused on reaching out to adolescent girls most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation.

The Health and Human Services Department study found only four residential treatment centers in the United States for child prostitutes, with a total of 45 beds.

Interviews with officials at the centers show that beds remain scarce, and that one of the four -- Standing Against Global Exploitation Safe House in San Francisco -- no longer

offers overnight accommodations. It does, however, provide nonresidential care for victims and helps place them with foster families.

Mollie Ring, the house's trafficking project manager, said the beds were eliminated because of a money crunch.

The remaining residential programs are:

* L.A.'s Children of the Night, which offers psychological treatment, academic assistance, and personal bedrooms and bathrooms, with 24 beds.

* New York-based Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, founded in 1999 by a former child prostitute, with 12 beds.

* Angela's House, a nonprofit in Georgia run by the Center to End Adolescent Sexual Exploitation, which is expanding from six beds to eight. The house no longer has a waiting list, program manager Melba Robinson said, but funding remains a "huge issue."

That adds up to 44 beds -- one less than two years ago.

It's not nearly enough, said Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. He estimated that U.S. child victims numbered between 100,000 and 300,000.

"You can't just take them home," Allen said. "The challenge is there are not enough resources" to help them.

Keith Haight, a former Los Angeles police detective who retired in 2008, spent 22 years on the vice squad. He said despite the push in the last few years to help victims, rather than prosecute them as prostitutes, how to do it remained elusive.

"A lot of places don't want to take responsibility for girls that are known to be sexually active," he said.

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