

## Angela's House is a haven of healing for prostituted children

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Before Christmas, like children everywhere, the girls made wish lists.

One wanted hair ribbons and a pink bedspread. One hoped for a CD player and a coloring book. Another, a pink radio and a blanket with a picture of cartoon dog Scooby-Doo.

They were girls free to be girls again.

For five years, girls rescued from prostitution in metro Atlanta have found a haven in Angela's House, out of the grasp of pimps and others who exploited and abused them. More than 90 girls, some as young as 11, have come to Angela's House for help.

Some were runaways lured into prostitution, some were kidnapped and forced into prostitution, some were homeless and desperate.

The address of the two-story group home in rural Fulton County is kept secret out of concerns for the girls' safety. It sits about 500 feet from the road on a wooded lot with a locked gate. Inside, the walls are the color of butter cookies, and sunlight fills the rooms. Cathedral ceilings and soft sofas make the house airy and comfortable.

Angela's House officials wouldn't allow residents to be interviewed, citing a desire to protect the girls' identities. But workers described briefly a few of the harrowing experiences of past residents and how the girls managed to break away from life on the streets.

Like the 15-year-old who made the mistake of getting into the car of a man she met at a mall in Atlanta. The man took her to a hotel, imprisoned her in a room and, for weeks, made money by selling her for sex. She escaped when she left his sight to supposedly take a bath, and hotel guests called the police to help her.

Or the 14-year-old runaway who was introduced by another girl to a man who introduced her to drugs, then forced her into sex with multiple partners. When she was about to be sold to another pimp, she broke free and ran. She was shot in the leg, but survived.

Then there was the 13-year-old who talked on a phone chat line with a man who ended up figuring out her address. She was kidnapped and raped multiple times, and video of the rapes was posted on the Internet for profit.

### Space too limited

Girls who come to Angela's House can stay for up to six months. Six girls live in the house at a time, two to a bedroom. Some keep stuffed animals on their beds. The girls receive therapy, along with medical and psychological assessments, while staff workers develop long-range plans for their care.

Residents attend school on the campus of Inner Harbour, a psychiatric hospital for children in Douglasville.

But the limited space at Angela's House is no match for the need in metro Atlanta, which authorities call a hub for the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

"The line keeps getting longer and longer at the door," said Stephanie Davis, policy adviser on women's issues to

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin.

At least a dozen girls are on a waiting list to get into Angela's House on any given day, said Kimberley Borna, executive director of the Juvenile Justice Fund. The nonprofit organization, affiliated with the Fulton County Juvenile Court, owns the house, which is funded by donations and the state's Department of Juvenile Justice.

The Juvenile Justice Fund now is seeking \$700,000 from the state's 2008 general budget to expand services to children who have been prostituted. The request is for a seven-bed regional assessment center and emergency shelter — sort of a pre-Angela's House — possibly at Inner Harbour, whose staff already oversees treatment of Angela's House residents.

At the proposed center, prostituted children could find safety, start to heal and be evaluated, then referred to services they need, such as long-term treatment.

"These girls need immediate shelter and housing," Borna said. And beyond that, "if we're not properly assessing children and we send them on the wrong treatment path, then we're really setting them up for failure."

### **'It's a Georgia problem'**

Many prostituted girls never make it as far as Angela's House. They often end up locked in youth detention centers, which child advocates say is a problematic way to link them with help.

Meanwhile, Juvenile Court judges struggle with few options for helping girls escape prostitution other than short-term detention.

"The state should be seeking ways to help," said Fulton County Juvenile Court Chief Judge Sanford Jones. "It is a problem that is not getting any better."

Child prostitution is not just an inner-city problem, Davis points out. "Girls are trafficked to Atlanta from all over the state, so it's a Georgia problem," she said.

When girls are placed at Angela's House, they're leery. "They're not used to people being so willing to help," said Jeff Dingler, director of transitional services at Inner Harbour. Most arrive with only the clothes they're wearing. Some carry their few belongings in garbage bags.

They have an "almost calloused exterior, just from their experiences," Dingler said. "Number one is to build trust with the girls."

They start to heal by talking about what happened, he said. "As they start to talk about it, it becomes less powerful. It's no longer a shrouded secret for them. ... Then they can let go of it. What that allows them to do is to become a child again."

Dingler recalls one 12-year-old who softened over time. One day she asked for a doll, an encouraging sign.

"Once she had become a child again, it was very common to see her playing with that baby doll," Dingler said.

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