

## Help end child sex slavery

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By now, you have probably heard about the horrors of the child sex slave trade throughout Eastern Europe, Asia and Third World countries. Sadly, however, the victimization of young girls isn't just taking place in a land far away.

It's happening right here in Georgia — and it's happening to our children. Some call it child prostitution. In reality, it's nothing short of slavery.

Recent quarterly results from an ongoing independent tracking study indicate that more than 250 adolescent girls are being commercially sexually exploited each month in Georgia through the Internet, escort services and on the streets. This survey was commissioned by the "A Future. Not a Past" campaign to stop the prostitution of children in Georgia.

These young girls are often runaways from the communities we call home. They are from Atlanta, from Savannah, from Macon, from Albany, from Dalton — and even from towns like Cairo, Jesup and Sylvania. Many of these runaways are escaping homes where they have been physically and sexually abused. But they are running from a bad situation into something even worse.

Studies have shown that once a runaway is on the streets, she is approached within 48 to 72 hours for commercial sex. An adult may offer food, shelter and, unfortunately, drugs in exchange for a sexual favor.

A "recruiter" may offer the child food and shelter, and then shortly require the girl to repay the debt by prostituting herself for the "household." Or a pimp may drug, beat and rape the girl into submission before adding her to his "stable."

Georgia already has strong laws protecting these children and mandating sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years for both pimps and johns.

We need adequate resources and political will to enforce these laws. And more than that, we need assistance for the victims and assistance from them to stop these horrors.

Right now, there is an appropriations request for \$560,000 pending before the Georgia General Assembly that will provide funds for a Regional Assessment Center that will fulfill two important functions:

> Providing supportive physical and mental health care services to victims, enabling these young girls to build better lives; and

> Providing physical protection and psychological support for victims so they can work with law enforcement to get these predators off the streets before they can harm other children.

The Regional Assessment Center alone won't end the prostitution of children in our state — but it will help us make a strong start.

Almost a century and a half ago, this country united to end slavery, and the time has come to once again fight the sexual enslavement of these vulnerable children.

In this day and age, there is no reason why we should allow even a single child to be sexually abused, particularly for commercial gain.

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