

Campaign under way to end child prostitution

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Sunday, August 24, 2008

Prostitution harms more girls in Georgia in one month than are killed in car accidents in a year, say leaders of a campaign to rid the state of the problem.

The campaign — using the theme “A Future. Not A Past.” — launched earlier this year. It seeks to make child sexual exploitation less profitable for pimps and more costly for johns. The tools: education, intervention, prevention and legislation.

The campaign has \$560,000 in state money for a Georgia Regional Assessment Center that will serve as a haven for victims and help authorities nab their exploiters. A state committee will take a harder look at the issue. The campaign also plans better law enforcement training, and it has commissioned studies measuring public awareness and the scope of the problem.

The Atlanta Women’s Foundation and the Juvenile Justice Fund head the campaign. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution spoke with campaign coordinator Kaffie McCullough, who said she “cried at the breakfast table” and was moved to act after reading about the issue in the AJC eight years ago.

Q: What is the scope of child prostitution in Georgia?

A: “A Future. Not A Past.” has commissioned an outside research firm to measure the scope of the problem in Georgia. The last count, conducted in May 2008, showed 272 girls exploited on the streets, over the Internet, through escort services and in major hotels in that month. One hundred twenty-nine girls are exploited on any busy night through those four portals. That’s more girls harmed by prostitution in one month than are killed in car accidents in a complete year.

Q: Rate the quality of how the issue is being addressed in metro Atlanta and the rest of the state.

A: We have a number of very committed, competent and passionate people dealing with this issue in Georgia. Many of our legislators have become strongly committed to making changes in this problem in Georgia. Many churches have formed an alliance to ensure this issue stays in the public eye. More service providers are stepping up to provide additional beds for victims. We have a coalition partners group that meets quarterly to make sure that we don’t duplicate efforts.

Q: How does that compare with what’s happening elsewhere across the country?

A: Georgia and Atlanta are at the forefront of addressing this issue. The research I just referenced is one of a kind in the nation. Angela’s House [in metro Atlanta] is one of only three safe houses in the United States, and I know of no other statewide initiative that is as comprehensive as that we are undertaking in Georgia.

Q: Seeing any early results from the campaign-related work already under way?

A: We were able to secure funding we needed from the Legislature this year — although we are trying to protect that now in the face of the budget cuts the governor has requested. If by results you mean more arrests, prosecutions or fewer victims, the answer is no. We have a long way to go. If by results you mean the mobilizing of a community, increased awareness of the issue and increased support with policy-makers, I would say yes. The Governor's Office of Children and Youth is convening a group to look at this whole issue, which never would have happened even one year ago.

Q: What long-term impact do you hope for?

A: Long term, we hope to have made an impact on the demand side of this horrific business. We hope to have some cases in court where the perpetrators are being brought to justice and sentenced in a way that will serve as a deterrent for others. We also hope to have greater capacity to treat the victims ... and begin to restore their lives.