

The Case for a Residential Recovery Program for Prostituted Children

October 29, 2009

Summary

There are between 300 and 500 prostituted children in King County today, some as young as 11.¹ Prostituted children are subject to severe physical and psychological abuse from pimps and “johns”. They often experience mental illness and substance abuse problems. Recovery from the resulting trauma requires extensive and highly specialized services provided in a safe setting. There are no services specifically designed for these children today—in Seattle, in King County, or anywhere in the state of Washington. In fact, few such programs exist in the country. Over \$1,000,000 in King County and other funding obtained last year for a two-year residential recovery pilot program to serve these children is in jeopardy due to King County budget constraints.

After a year of planning, the City of Seattle will be ready to launch this program in early 2010, but to do so will require a mix of public and private funding. In the longer term, we look forward to building from the pilot an innovative model and statewide network to help such children throughout Washington.

Prostituted Youth in King County

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn recently wrote—

“In the 19th century, the paramount moral challenge was slavery. In the 20th century, it was totalitarianism. In this century, it is the brutality inflicted on so many women and girls around the globe . . .”²

This brutality exists in our own community.

In June 2008, the City of Seattle Human Services Department released a special report by Dr. Debra Boyer which identified 238 specific individual children in King County in 2007 involved in prostitution. Many others—mostly girls—arrested for other criminal activities were found to have also engaged in prostitution. In September 2009, there were 30 active criminal investigations by Seattle police against pimps involving 33 prostituted children.

Most prostituted children have been victimized by a lifetime of exposure to emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and parental neglect. These youth are psychologically manipulated and physically coerced by pimps, some of whom are gang members. Once exploited, these children are often trapped in a cycle of violence, facing repeated beatings and degradation at the hands of pimps and “johns”. They face a high risk of pregnancy and STDs (including HIV and Hepatitis C). They have a greater chance of developing psychiatric disorders (including PTSD), attempting suicide, and are at high risk for drug and/or alcohol addiction. Without treatment, these children are likely to fall deeper into the criminal

¹ Boyer, Debra. Who Pays the Price? Assessment of Youth Involvement in Prostitution in Seattle, June 2008 (http://www.seattle.gov/humanservices/domesticviolence/Report_YouthInProstitution.pdf).

² Kristoff, Nicholas and Sheryl WuDunn, *The New York Times Magazine*, August 23, 2009.

subculture of prostitution. They will become frequent users of public health care, treatment services, and the criminal justice system well into adulthood.

Data from Atlanta's Angela's House, one of a handful of residential recovery programs for prostituted children, indicate that 70% of the youth served during 2007 reported a history of childhood sexual abuse, 86% reported significant substance abuse, over half of the girls evidenced moderate or severe depression, and 86% had a history of criminal charges and incarceration.

Prostituted children require a safe haven where they can receive care and services specific to their needs and begin to rebuild their lives.³ There is evidence that a dedicated residential recovery program, with wraparound mental health, chemical dependency, and educational and vocational services provided by well trained specialists both on-site and in the community, can help them succeed in breaking free. A recent study shows that comprehensive services can result in significant reductions in substance use and mental health symptoms among women engaged in prostitution.⁴

While youth agencies in King County serve prostituted youth as part of their general clientele, there are no dedicated programs here or anywhere in Washington State devoted to meeting their unique needs. In fact, there are only 39 shelter beds in the United States specifically dedicated to prostituted children. The present climate is similar to what domestic violence victims experienced 40 years ago when they received limited services from untrained providers in unsecure homeless shelters. Today, specialized programs much more effectively meet the needs of DV victims.

Not only is child sex trafficking a moral issue, it is a growing public safety issue. Fifteen years ago, gang activities were linked primarily with drug trafficking. That has now shifted, and a newer source of revenue for gangs is pimping girls. The Seattle Police Department confirms that gangs are running prostitutes—both adults and minors. The prostitutes engage in a host of criminal activities which benefit their pimps (and the gangs to which they belong). The structure of the pimp-prostitute relationship contributes to stubborn crime patterns in our community—petty theft, robbery, assault, drug dealing, and chronic nuisance properties.⁵

The following description of prostitution activity is taken from a July 2009 criminal plea agreement entered in King County Superior Court involving a defendant charged with using juveniles in a gang-related prostitution scheme:

“I know that (name), a white female, worked for (pimp) and I know that he beat her when she either disobeyed him or did not make him enough money. He would brag to me about beating her and I have seen him hit (name) when she disobeyed him. I know that (pimp's) way of doing business is when he recruits girls to work for him is to use whatever force or fear he needs to keep them in line. (Pimp) would take the money from his girls and spend it on things like new shoes, clothes, gas for his car, and pot. I know that (pimp) also had juvenile females working for him (he was their pimp). Like me with (the girl I pimp), (pimp) would call all of the shots with these girls and take all of their money. He used force and threats as a means to coerce the girls

³ The Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic of the Emory University School of Law. Commercial Exploitation of Children in Georgia, July 23, 2008.

⁴ Burnette, M.L., Schneider, R., Timko, C., and Ilgen, M.A. Impact of Substance-Use Disorder Treatment on Women Involved in Prostitution: Substance Use, Mental Health, and Prostitution One Year after Treatment. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs*. January 2009, 70(1):32-40.

⁵ Chief John Diaz, Seattle Police Department, confirms the growth in and pattern of gang-related prostitution.

and keep them obedient and under his control. Most of the girls knew that (pimp) was a member of (gang name).”

Dr. Boyer’s report documenting children involved in street prostitution in Seattle-King County was a wake-up call to our community. In the fall of 2008, the King County Council approved funding of an innovative two year pilot program to put our community at the forefront in tackling this issue. Additional dollars were pledged by the City of Seattle and United Way. However, due to the King County budget crisis, the County Executive now recommends diverting these funds to other purposes. As a result, a new effort to combine city and private funding is necessary so this urgently needed program can be implemented in 2010.

Program Design

The program will offer a shelter and a residential recovery center at separate locations. The program will serve primarily females between 14 and 17 years of age who are actively engaged in street-based and/or internet-based prostitution. Referrals will come from the criminal justice system (police, juvenile court, and juvenile probation), other social service agencies, and street and detention-based outreach services throughout King County. The children will first be evaluated in the shelter to establish that they are a good match for the residential program. State legislation passed in July 2009 allows prosecutors to divert youth to service-rich programs such as this. These youth programs must be state-certified.⁶

The City of Seattle is currently pursuing a provider and site for the program. The program provider will have a successful track record and demonstrated mission of providing services to runaway homeless youth. Ultimately, all or a portion of the program will be run out of an existing youth housing facility with sufficient unused capacity to accommodate the program. Ideally, the facility will be situated in a location that distances clients from pimps and others who have a strong untoward influence over them and the program will be dedicated to prostituted youth only. The same level of security as domestic violence confidential housing will be provided. All project staff will be trained to maintain a safe facility and respond immediately and appropriately to threats.

Each youth who enters the residential program will receive a full assessment to determine individual issues that must be addressed by the program, including mental health, chemical dependency, physical health, educational and schooling needs, life skills, and relationships with family members (including how they want to connect with family members). Staff will provide on-site case management, support groups and comprehensive and individualized mental health and chemical dependency treatment. If a youth needs to enter an in-treatment chemical dependency program before entering the residential recovery program, such arrangements will be made. Specialized prostitution recovery services will be provided including counseling for traumatic stress and trauma recovery (under the direction of Harborview’s Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress), survivor support groups, and health education. Clients will receive medical care, life skills training, support for GED or high school completion, help preparing for enrollment in post-secondary education, job readiness training, employment placement, and internships. Lastly, these clients will be given safety, security and opportunities to have fun, engage in age-appropriate activities and begin to reclaim their youth.

⁶ RCW Chapter 13.32A governs the placement of children in state-certified facilities, and outlines the processes that must be followed by the facility provider to obtain parental, guardian, or Child Protective Services consent to deliver services.

Program Goals, Services, and Outcomes

Expectations for performance must take into account the extremely challenging circumstances of these children. Research indicates that most were victimized before ever engaging in prostitution. Because they have been psychologically manipulated, physically coerced, and deeply indoctrinated by their exploiters, they tend to run back to the streets if they have the opportunity. And, because they have often experienced violence and high levels of trauma on a repeated basis, they can be difficult to engage. Most of these children have missed normal developmental experiences and lack basic life skills; they often have decreased coping skills, poor self-concepts and developmental delays and some may be bipolar or suffer from other mental illnesses. As a consequence, relapse and program exits will occur.

The City of Seattle plans to contract with an evaluator to assess the effectiveness (outcomes) of this program. Possible outcomes might include:

- Do participants in the residential recovery program have lower involvement (recidivism) with the criminal justice system as a result of their involvement in the program vs. those who are not in the program but have similar backgrounds?
- Are youth in the program more likely to participate in the prosecution of their pimp/exploiter(s) than those not in the program but with similar backgrounds?
- Are youth able to set and achieve personal goals?
- Is there a decrease in mental health and substance abuse symptoms for youth served vs. those not served but with similar backgrounds?
- What are the key program components that help youth achieve their goals, decrease recidivism and address mental health and drug use symptoms?
- What are key characteristics of youth coming into the program that help them achieve their goals, decrease recidivism, and address mental health and drug use symptoms?

This pilot program will use a rigorous evaluation component to build an ongoing program that will be a national model. Another goal is for the program to evolve into a network of providers serving youth statewide while allowing them to be close to family members, as appropriate.

Annual Service Delivery

- Housing and comprehensive recovery services for up to 30 youth per year.
- After care and delinquency prevention for up to 15 youth per year, including services for those who age out of the program.

Program Funding and Expenses

The program will be a unique example of community collaboration, involving contributions from private and foundation funders, the City of Seattle, the King County Juvenile Court, the primary provider and other community-based agencies. Private and foundation funders are being sought to cover the costs of program-specific staff.