

Advocates clash over sex trafficking treatment in Florida safe houses | State | Bradenton Herald

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Therapist Tabitha Gallerani gestures as she talks to a reporter at the safe house in Miami, Thursday, Aug. 8, 2013. When Gov. Rick Scott and Attorney General Pam Bondi visited Miami last summer, they touted a new law that would allow sex trafficking victims to go to a safe, therapeutic environment instead of being jailed as prostitutes. The state's first short-term safe house opened in a crime-ridden neighborhood next to boarded-up homes. Within days, several of the victims ran away and one was raped after she fled, according to a recent report from a Miami-Dade County grand jury. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz) ALAN DIAZ — AP

MIAMI -- When Gov. Rick Scott and Attorney General Pam Bondi visited Miami a year ago, they touted a new law that would allow sex trafficking victims to go to a safe, therapeutic place instead of being jailed as prostitutes.

The state's first short-term safe house opened in April in a crime-ridden neighborhood that was a hotbed for sex trafficking.

Within days, several victims ran away and one was raped after she fled, according to a recent report from a Miami-Dade County grand jury.

The six-bed safe house closed in June, reigniting a debate about how to best help sex trafficking victims.

Some advocates are pushing to make safe houses locked down facilities to help victims break their bond with their pimps, while others warn locking them up in safe houses, which look like regular homes, will cause more harm.

When advocates pushed legislation last year to open safe houses around the state, they warned girls would run away because they are often more comfortable on the streets and accustomed to moving around with few belongings and personal attachments.

It's part of the process, similar to relapse in addiction treatment, said Mary Faraldo, community relations officer for Kristi House.

At the Miami safe house, police drove by every half hour, and a massive iron clad fence and alarm system secured the home, but the girls were not forced to stay.

"Locking them down is not the solution. It doesn't work," said Faraldo. "Girls ran because they run from everywhere ... which is what we're trying to teach them not to do anymore."

In the past, victims have been kept in jail and pressured to give information about their pimps or sent to juvenile detention where they receive little treatment and return to their pimps once

released.

Florida is one of the most popular destinations for human traffickers in the United States and sex trafficking of young victims is among the most under-reported offenses, according to the Department of Children and Families.

The agency started a statewide task force in 2009 because the majority of sex trafficking victims are foster youth.

Pimps prey on vulnerable girls, who are often victims of sexual abuse, posing as boyfriends, showering girls with attention and gifts, and slowly lure them into turning tricks. Pimps often beat and torture the girls, threaten to harm family members if they leave, force them to recruit other girls and ply them with drugs to keep them under their control. The girls often refuse to cooperate with police, making it difficult for prosecutors to build cases.

Kristi House opened Florida's first short-term shelter under a new Safe Harbor law where girls can live and receive treatment for one to two months.