

Human trafficking bill would increase penalties on Johns

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HARTFORD -- All Marie wants is to continue the healing process after her forced career as a prostitute.

But for that to happen, she needs the General Assembly to create a law that will wipe away her past as a teenage victim of human trafficking.

Currently, for her to receive protection from her former pimp, she has to be labeled as a criminal.

"Even though they had identified me in the Hartford system as a victim, the courts had to treat me as a criminal to keep me safe, in order to get me a program or get me to a safe house," she told lawmakers on Monday. "When I was released I still had that criminal record, but without that criminal record, the courts couldn't offer me any safety."

Under a bill aired in a public hearing before the powerful Judiciary Committee, state courts would be allowed to vacate criminal convictions of prostitutes in cases of human trafficking, while increasing criminal penalties for those who patronize prostitutes.

As many as 300,000 men and women under the age of 18 are victims of human trafficking, each of whom earns as much as \$450,000 a year for the pimps who imprison and abuse them.

State Rep. Jeffrey Berger, D-Waterbury, a retired Waterbury police officer, said Connecticut has a chance to set the national standard in fighting human trafficking.

"This would raise the bar," said Berger, a member of the Judiciary Committee who sponsored the legislation.

Richard Lepoutre, committee chairman for the organization Men Against Prostitution and Trafficking, said that human marketing is taking place throughout Connecticut.

"The truth is that most of the victims are not kidnapped or from some far off land," he said "Most often these victims are young women and men from Connecticut who are lured into a life of abuse, violence and rape and all of it is done for the profit and pleasure of the men who buy and sell these victims."

The committee's deadline for action is 5 p.m. Friday.

Marie, whose street name was "Autumn," said the Class A misdemeanor conviction for prostitution follows her anytime she applies for a job or a loan.

"As a survivor of this crime, I'm still looked upon as a criminal by Connecticut's legal system," she said. "Even though I was coerced by a pimp to live a life I did not choose, I was arrested for prostitution and that arrest stays with me every day of my life. Even though I continue to heal from these scars of slavery, my criminal record festers as a constant reminder of what was done to me. I was able to escape from my pimp because of a very compassionate and astute judge in Hartford who recognized my situation for what it was: modern day slavery."

Marie, who declined to reveal her surname, presented similar testimony last year, but lawmakers only approved a bill banning newspapers such as the Advocate weeklies, from sexually oriented advertising.

"When I apply for a job or a loan I have to mention my past," she said. "Today I'm asking for Connecticut lawmakers to set me free."

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