

## Alameda County District Attorney kicks off campaign to combat child sex trafficking

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OAKLAND - Billboards and posters bearing the faces of former child sex trafficking victims and the stories of how they escaped a life of sexual exploitation will be popping up around Oakland as part of an extensive public awareness campaign.

The campaign was launched by Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley at a news conference at the Alameda County Family Justice Center in Oakland this morning.

"Our message is loud and clear," O'Malley said. "Our community will not tolerate the sale and purchase of children for sex. Every citizen must be informed about the crisis and understand how to be part of the solution."

The campaign, which is set to continue through Feb. 2, is part of the district attorney's ongoing efforts to combat child prostitution in Oakland, a persistent and highly visible problem that continues to grow each year, according to O'Malley.

Since 2006, the district attorney's office has prosecuted more than 325 local sex traffickers, she said.

O'Malley said the new campaign is intended mainly to educate the community about the "staggering number" of children who are victims of sex trafficking in Oakland.

Nola Brantley, executive director of the Oakland-based group Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting and Serving Sexually Exploited Youth, or MISSSEY, estimated that the organization helps about 250 local victims of child sex trafficking annually.

MISSEY, which collaborated with the district attorney's office on the campaign, provides a drop-in recovery center and case managers to work with sexually exploited minors and help connect them with housing, jobs and educational resources. Other local agencies that help child sex trafficking victims include Bay Area Women Against Rape, Covenant House and West Coast Children's Clinic.

The demand for help from local victims has only grown in recent years, Brantley said at today's news conference.

"The city of Oakland is known throughout the state and the nation as a red-light district for the buying and selling of children," she said.

According to O'Malley's office, the FBI has deemed the Bay Area a "high intensity child prostitution area" and identified Oakland as a hub for the crime.

But the district attorney emphasized that the minors involved in this type of crime are victims, not criminals -- an important distinction she hopes the billboard and poster campaign makes clear.

The perception of child sex workers as criminals "is what allows some societies to keep them invisible," O'Malley said.

"Here in Oakland ... we don't make these children invisible," she said.

Brantley said many of the child sex trafficking victims MISSEY sees were sexually abused before being prostituted and have long family histories of domestic abuse.

A large percentage are foster children or have come from otherwise unstable home environments, and are extremely vulnerable targets for pimps, who may lure their victims with promises of a safe home and a loving relationship, according to MISSEY.

Brantley and O'Malley said today that they are hopeful the new public awareness campaign will reach both current victims and children who are at risk of becoming involved in sex trafficking in the future.

The ads are also designed to reach victims who may be hesitant to accept help from outreach workers on the street where their pimps may be watching, said Bhavna Sharma, who helps oversee MISSEY's mentorship program.

The posters, in addition to featuring survivors of child sex trafficking, show a picture of a hotel bed alongside messages such as "Being a prostituted teen isn't a choice. It's slavery." Many of the ads also list numbers victims can call for help.

The posters will be put up in bus shelters, and the billboards will be displayed prominently along major thoroughfares in Oakland.

A team of graphic designers and copywriters donated their time to design the images and messages on the posters and billboards, and Clear Channel Outdoor donated the advertising space.

Victims of child sex trafficking are urged to call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at (510) 645-9388 or (888) 373-7888 for help.

Community members are also encouraged to report anonymous tips about child sex trafficking in their area by calling the Alameda County District Attorney's Human Exploitation and Trafficking Watch tip line at (510) 208-4959.

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