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APD, local nonprofit get financial boost to fight trafficking

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By Shelia M. Poole
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The city of Atlanta and a Georgia nonprofit that helps women who have been forced into the sex industry will receive more than \$240,000 to fight human trafficking.

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The funds come from more than \$3.2 million that was raised during the recent four-day Passion 2012 conference, which drew more than 42,000 young Christians, ranging in age from 18 to 25. The focus of the gathering, put on by Alpharetta-based Passion Conferences, was global human trafficking, which includes forced labor, child labor and sex trafficking.

Mayor Kasim Reed said in a statement that the money will be used to make "Atlanta a safer to place to live. Unfortunately,

our young people are oftentimes our most vulnerable, but with these funds we will be better poised to protect them. This significant contribution is absolutely critical and will go directly to the Atlanta Police Department's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Squad."

Wellspring Living, based in Tyrone, will receive \$141,000. The 11-year-old nonprofit, which relies on private funding and provides education and therapy, will use the money to renovate apartments that house up to 25 women, said President Mary Frances Bowley.

"These [Passion Conference] students rose up and said no way," she said.

Bowley said domestic sex trafficking remains a major problem in the state. "The issue is really so prevalent that we don't recognize it in our city," she said. "Just to know what they [the girls] have been through, it will just make you want to go out and hurt somebody. You just weep for what they've been through."

Each month, about 374 girls are commercially sexually exploited in Georgia, according to information on the Governor's Office for Children and Families website. The average age of entry into prostitution or the commercial sex market is between 12 and 14 years old.

Donations at the Passion 2012 conference ranged from a few dollars to a \$500,000 check from an anonymous couple, said organizers.

Among the donors was Lexie Ware, a 21-year-old student at Kennesaw State University, who learned that it doesn't take a lot to join the global fight.

"I have to actively be part of ending it here," said Ware, who gave \$50. "That's just really part of the Gospel, to give back to those who need to be set free."

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The Passion 2012 donation comes at a time when additional attention is being focused on the issue of human trafficking.

President Barack Obama recently declared January "National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month" and on Feb. 1, several advocacy groups will meet at the Georgia Capitol to press legislators to do more to end trafficking.

Additionally, Google said it will donate \$11.5 million to several nonprofits and coalitions on the forefront of the issue.

During the Atlanta conference, organizers erected a 103-foot sculpture of an outstretched hand that was that was draped with items typically made by "human slaves," including clothing, soccer balls, stuffed animals and even Christmas ornaments, said spokeswoman Brittany Thoms. There were also designated "freedom stations" where people lined up to make donations.

Bryson Vogeltanz, chief steward of Do Something Now which was part of Passion Conference, said the crowd comprised mostly of college students learned "what it means to walk out your faith and how it's closely aligned with action. Faith is something that moves us. It's about worship and justice."

The \$3.2 million total exceeded Do Something Now's original goal of \$1 million.

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