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# As transit ads end, Kim's Project continues to fight human trafficking

Posted by Roy Greene

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(Samantha Laine photo for boston.com)

An MBTA ad raising awareness about human trafficking.

By Samantha Laine, Globe Correspondent

As an MBTA public awareness campaign about human trafficking winds down, a non-profit agency continues to assist dozens of men and women, many of them formerly in state care, as they try to exit the sex trade.

Cherie Jimenez is the founder and director of the little-known Kim's Project, a non-profit agency on Commonwealth Avenue, near Boston University. The organization, which relies on donations to supplement a small federal grant, has provided resources to adult victims of trafficking and the sex trade since 2006.

Despite renewed attention to human trafficking in Boston in recent years -- including the transit ad initiative in October, and pending state legislation -- Kim's Project is the city's only survivor-led organization for adults. Jimenez, who was in the sex trade herself for about 20 years, describes the organization as an "exit program" that seeks to aid victims of the sex trade in breaking free from that lifestyle and starting fresh.

Re-creating a life after being victimized is difficult, Jimenez said. Kim's Project offers a variety of support services, including housing, educational support, tutoring, career counseling and clothing. To date, the organization has assisted about 175 adults in leaving the sex trade.

The clients referred to Kim's Project are predominantly women, ages 17 to 25. The organization also has worked with minors, as well as men and women in their 50s.

Jimenez said that three-quarters of the people referred to the agency are local residents, contrary to the popular assumption that trafficking is largely a foreign problem.

"Instead of looking at it like a foreign problem, it's helpful to look at what is happening in our communities," she said. "When people hear 'human trafficking,' they think of someone being brought here from abroad. Yes, that happens -- but it's not the predominant story."

Jimenez estimated that 60 to 70 percent of the young people who come to Kim's Project have "aged out" of state Department of Children and Families' custody, which ends when children turn 18. That trend suggests that DCF needs to do more to provide young adults with the skills needed to survive off the streets, Jimenez said.

Krystal, a Kim's Project client (whose last name is being withheld for privacy reasons) said she was placed in 10 different group homes while in DCF care. She reached the age of 18 with no family support or access to resources, she said. She was referred to Kim's Project after being sexually exploited.

"I was put in a situation when I was 15 that I didn't want to be in. But how was I going to eat, shower, wash my clothes?" Krystal said. "I let [others] take over my life. That's how I wound up being one of the statistics."

Human trafficking is considered to be one of the fastest-growing criminal industries in the world. A number of non-

profit anti-trafficking and anti-sex trade programs, such as Kim's Project, have sprung up in urban centers to assist victims and bring attention to the problem.

Throughout the month of October, transit advertisements on the MBTA's Orange and Red lines and on buses featured true stories of those impacted by human trafficking. The ads directed residents to [www.TheSexTradeDestroysLives.org](http://www.TheSexTradeDestroysLives.org) to learn more about human trafficking.

"This public awareness campaign introduced us to just a few real stories that represent thousands of similar stories of innocent lives at risk or in danger in Massachusetts," Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray said in announcing the program, funded by the Boston Public Health Commission.

In January, the city announced a policy shift that includes not prosecuting juveniles arrested for prostitution and instead offering those victims social service support. In addition, law enforcement officials have refocused their efforts on the pimps who exploit juveniles, city officials said.

But as the transit ad campaign draws to an end, the state still has not enacted proposed legislation regarding human trafficking.

Members of the House and the Senate recently passed two different anti-trafficking bills. The House version focuses on imposing harsher penalties on pimps and other traffickers, while the Senate bill focuses on providing services and protection for victims.

The bills are in conference, meaning the two chambers will need to agree on one bill before it can be passed and submitted to Governor Deval Patrick for signature.

Until that happens, Massachusetts remains one of just three states that does not have specific legislation addressing human trafficking.

Jimenez believes passage of the bill will be a "step in the right direction," but she said more work is needed to battle the sex trade.

"Young people are facing vulnerability due to poverty, lack of education, lack of resources and lack of family support, and you need to have that to survive," she said, suggesting that reforms are needed to the education system and DCF.

Because trafficking crimes involve fear and threatened or actual violence, it is impossible to get a full count of the number of victims, public health officials say. However, in 2010, the Boston Police Department Human Trafficking Unit investigated 100 cases of trafficking and made referrals for services in other cases in which youth were deemed at risk for commercial sexual exploitation.

Jimenez said many of the women she sees are intelligent and resilient, but lack access to resources. Kim's Project tries to help women begin to identify their strengths and talents, so that they can set out on successful career paths.

Krystal said she is grateful to have found the organization.

"You're trying to rebuild your life, and you need resources. Kim's Project provides someone to help you get those resources," she said.

To report suspected sexual exploitation, advocates recommend calling the local police, or the Family Justice Center at 617.779.2100.

(Samantha Laine photo for boston.com)

Donations of clothing that have been collected by Kim's Project.

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