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Human trafficking: Washington works to stop demand

By Andy Hobbs, FEDERAL WAY MIRROR
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The key to stopping forced labor and sex slavery - also known as human trafficking - is to stop demand.

The Seattle area ranks among the top in the world for sexual exploitation of minors, according to Robin Schildmeyer of Genesis Project, an organization dedicated to protecting young women victimized by human trafficking. The organization provides a 24-hour safe house, and estimates the average age of entry into

prostitution is 13. Many of the victims are runaways with a history of sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and poverty.

Human trafficking is especially prevalent in Washington because of the state's ports, said Sen. Tracey Eide (D-District 30).

Both Eide and Schildmeyer were panel members at an awareness forum sponsored by Soroptimist International of Federal Way and held in a packed council chambers Sept. 29 at City Hall.

Eide introduces a resolution on the Senate floor every Jan. 11 for Human Trafficking Awareness Day. She and fellow Senate colleague Jeanne Kohl-Welles are staunch advocates for human trafficking victims in Washington.

The state Legislature has been chipping away at human trafficking since 2002, with the creation of a task force and the "Mail Order Bride Act." That law, enacted after a pair of mail order brides were murdered by their husbands, requires matchmaking organizations to notify the would-be brides in their native language that they have a right to a background check on clients.

In 2003, Washington became the first state to pass a law that criminalizes human trafficking. Since then, a series of laws have addressed restrictions on sex tourism, along with confidentiality and benefits for victims. In 2012, the Legislature will attempt to restrict advertisements for escort services related to underage victims.

Human trafficking cases have also hit the Federal Way area in recent years.

Five residents from Federal Way and Auburn were charged in 2008 with conspiracy to engage in forced labor of a 16-year-old Afghan immigrant. Three men arranged for the girl to immigrate to the U.S. two years before when she was age 14. One of the men attempted to marry the girl, and was accused of sexually assaulting and beating her. During her time in the United States, the girl allegedly was forced to perform household chores for two other residents.

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"This is something as a police department that we can't do alone," said Police Chief [Brian Wilson](#), one of the panel members at the forum. He noted the need for schools and social service agencies to assist law enforcement in finding both victims and perpetrators.

Federal Way police have had success with prostitution sting operations, Wilson said. He described one operation in which detectives dressed as prostitutes and walked Pacific Highway South - sometimes attracting a line of two or three cars containing customers waiting to negotiate services. In just a few hours, police nabbed more than a dozen potential johns that night, Wilson said.

In fact, prostitution is so prevalent on Internet site Craigslist.org that an officer could make an arrest within any given two-hour window, Wilson said.

"I'm very much in favor of going after the predators," he said.

In the South Sound area, Sisters Against Human Trafficking is an organization dedicated to raising awareness. At the Sept. 29 forum, Sister [Donna Fread](#) noted the minor success that came from a bus ad campaign. More than 20 buses in Pierce County displayed a message to "Stop the demand." She described one case involving a pair of young girls held at an apartment in East Tacoma, where an adult woman advertised the girls online and set them up with men.

"We are working to educate and make people curious about human trafficking," Fread said, noting that her organization is currently compiling a resource booklet to assist with victims.

Chris Johnson, policy director for Attorney General [Rob McKenna](#), credits the growing grass-roots support for allowing the state to "chip away" at human trafficking. A major victory against human trafficking came in 2009, when Seattle pimp DeShawn "Cash Money" Clark, 19, became the first person in Washington to be convicted of human trafficking. [Clark was sentenced to 17 years in prison.](#)

Johnson noted that the [Seattle Police Department](#) offers training statewide for law enforcement agencies in dealing with human trafficking. He also praised current initiatives on the state and national levels, such as the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2011.

"Where we are with human trafficking is where we were with domestic violence 30 years ago," said Johnson during the forum. "We have a long way to go."

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