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Law will help victims of child prostitution

The Legislature should help victims of child prostitution by allowing law enforcement to tape conversations between pimps and underage prostitutes.

A BILL in the state Legislature would help victims of child prostitution by allowing police to tape conversations between pimps and child prostitutes.

The bill by Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson, D-Seattle, would exempt suspected pimps from a state law making it illegal to eavesdrop on phone calls without a warrant. Allowing the recording of conversations between child prostitutes and their pimps offers law enforcement another tool to fight the growing problem of young girls forced into prostitution.

Police often face an uphill battle building enough evidence to apprehend pimps. Often, young victims are too frightened to help or testify.

A sustained focus by law enforcement, child-welfare authorities and lawmakers on the problem of child prostitution is important. A study that identified more than 500 children involved in prostitution in King County compels action.

Moreover, the problem of teens and children even younger forced to work the streets has grown in Spokane and Pierce counties.

Dickerson is attentive to the legislation's possible minefields. She is inserting language to ensure young victims understand the risk in helping police. Washington state doesn't have a program to protect witnesses. The federal government does, but victims should be clearly informed that unless their case is in federal court, they can't count on any protection.

Concern raised by child advocates about using children to lure pimps into phone calls ought not be easily dismissed. Indeed, these victims are often traumatized.

But Rep. Chris Hurst, D-Enumclaw, is convincing in arguing for the pain of trauma to be balanced with a determination to get out of a dangerous and horrific situation. The best way a victim can escape a pimp is to help police make a swift arrest.

Monitoring and annual reviews by judges would safeguard against law enforcement abuse of the eavesdropping rule.

This bill offers the legislators a chance to help young victims of child prostitution. They should not pass it up.