

State takes first steps to help sex trafficking victims

By Frank Mecca and Kate Walker
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Nine children who were being repeatedly sold for sex and exploited by pimps were recovered last week in the Sacramento region, part of a nationwide FBI sting that recovered 168 children across the United States. Sacramento had the sixth highest number of recoveries out of the 54 FBI field offices involved.

Many people who read about the sting were probably shocked to learn child sex trafficking is happening in our community. Every day, children are being moved quickly and discreetly along Highways 80, 50, 99 and 5, and trafficked in parking lots, hotels and through various online escort services. The billion-dollar trafficking industry is nimble and ever-evolving, making identifying victims and stopping perpetrators very difficult.

California has emerged as a magnet for sex trafficking of children; three of the nation's top 13 child sex trafficking areas are here – San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. No community escapes exploitation's reach.

The victims recently recovered in Sacramento ranged in age from 15 to 17. For many of these victims, their exploitation likely began years earlier. The average age that children are first trafficked is between 12 and 14 for girls, and 11 and 13 for boys. Victims as young as age 9 have been reported. Several studies indicate that between 70 and 90 percent of exploited children have experienced child sexual abuse before they are commercially exploited. Sex traffickers are known to target foster youth because of their vulnerabilities and prior abuse.

These children are often mislabeled “prostitutes” and put into juvenile detention facilities. For years, it was widely believed punishment and locking children up was best because of misconceptions they were choosing to engage in prostitution. Extensive research shows that's far from the truth. Many child sex trafficking victims have had tumultuous home lives, punctuated by abuse and neglect. Some turn to the streets for refuge, but struggle to meet their basic needs and find themselves exchanging sex for food and shelter. Others might fall victim to the promises and coercion of a seemingly caring adult who uses threats and violence to maintain control.

Due to the violence and complex trauma these children endure, they have unique emotional and mental health needs that can take years of intense intervention to address. Similarly, they

need extensive treatment to remedy their physical health, often compromised by beatings, food deprivation and sexual violence.

The child welfare system – the system designed to protect and serve abused and neglected children – has been ill-equipped to meet their needs.

Fortunately, Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature recognize that protecting and serving child victims of commercial sexual exploitation is an issue of critical importance for California. Thanks to their leadership, the 2014-15 state budget includes key policy and funding provisions that bring hope for these children and a path toward addressing this crisis.

The budget includes \$5 million in 2014-15, and \$14 million in ongoing funding, to help victims through the child welfare system. This will enable county agencies, including child welfare and law enforcement, to immediately start working together to ensure child victims receive services they need to overcome their trauma. Part of this effort will include training for social workers and foster caregivers to identify victims, prevent foster youth from being recruited from group homes and to provide services and treatment to victims.

To ensure these children are treated as victims of abuse and not criminals, the governor and Legislature also clarified that the child welfare system will have primary responsibility for serving victims of child sex trafficking. This moves California closer to decriminalizing children, preventing victims from being punished and locked up for actions they were forced to commit by exploiters.

These are critical, first steps in acknowledging that we have much more work ahead in understanding and addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children in California. It's imperative that county agencies, community organizations, and the public work together to ensure victims gain access to the services they need to become survivors and eventually leaders in our communities.

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