

Prostitution in Los Angeles: Programs like Children of the Night are all too rare

By Susan Abram, Los Angeles Daily News

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Van Nuys-based Children of the Night helps underage prostitutes leave the streets

The children come through the doors with blackened eyes and broken teeth.

Some are branded; gang members tattoo their marks on a girl's jawbone to show she's their property. Once, a 13-year-old was brought in with breast implants. Her pimp's idea.

Lois Lee has seen all kinds of youth walk into Children of the Night, the organization she founded 35 years ago, first as a drop-in center in Hollywood, then as a 24-bed residential shelter in Van Nuys for



(Photo by John McCoy/Los Angeles Daily News)

Lois Lee, president of Children of the Night, talks with one of the girls staying at the organization's Van Nuys shelter in March 2014. Lee's organization offers a safe haven, education and a place to live for young women who are leaving a life of prostitution.

prostitution's youngest victims. It is one of only a handful of its kind in the nation.

In the early days, law enforcement wasn't prepared to deal properly with the youngest teens who were selling their bodies for money, Lee said. No one wanted to admit that adults were paying to have sex

with 14-year-olds.

But in the last two years especially, the attitude toward children sold for sex has changed. The word "prostitute" has been replaced with the phrase "sex traffic survivor." Awareness has grown through billboard campaigns, marches down Los Angeles streets and

government-backed task forces. And state legislators have introduced more bills that would penalize pimps with longer jail sentences and higher fines. But while Lee praises the increased awareness, the posters of doe-eyed children and proclamations to end sex trafficking still don't translate into the kind of complex help and funding

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many youth and adults who have sex for money need.

“People only want to help the little children,” Lee said. “They don’t want to help my kids. My kids are teenagers who put earrings in places they don’t belong. Their favorite word starts with the letter F.”

Especially lacking are the number of residential facilities that provide specialized long-term care and rehabilitation. Those services include helping teens and young adults obtain high school diplomas, therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder, and life skills that can help them live on



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their own. Of the 10 state and federal legislative bills proposed this year to combat sex trafficking, for example, only one directly addresses the need for government funding for long-term and residential services.

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There are relatively few other facilities around the country that provide similar services — and the numbers are hard to track, researchers say, because programs open and close, while others may offer help for sex-trafficked victims as just one of many services.

One study, in 2008 by the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, found only four residential treatment centers in the United States for sex-trafficked children with a total of 45 beds, including Children of the Night.

Another one, last year by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, found 33 residential programs nationwide with 682 beds that worked exclusively with trafficking victims. California had the most with nine residential programs offering 371 beds for victims.

“We need more services and shelters for juvenile and adult victims,” said Donna Hughes, a leading international researcher on human trafficking and professor of Gender and Women’s Studies Program at the University of Rhode Island. “We don’t have nearly the support for victims of trafficking that exist for victims of domestic violence.”

She said while there are experts who know how to work with victims of sex trafficking, their specialized knowledge may not be widely accessed among service providers. She too has noted the change in attitude for victims of “sex trafficking,” but not victims of “prostitution.” The terminology makes a big difference on funding.

“If people see the issue as one of prostitution, then they don’t want to give support for services,” she said. “Sex trafficking is called ‘modern-day slavery’ and the traffickers are seen as brutal criminals. Change those words to ‘prostitution and pimps’ and people assume that everyone involved is consenting to the activity. Prostitution and sex trafficking have different



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Nearly 150 youth were arrested last year for prostitution in Los Angeles County and of those, 94 were from the Compton and Long Beach areas, county officials said. About 89 percent of those arrested were known to the foster care system.

“All counties currently lack capacity to provide enhanced supervision and support to protect victims through the regular foster care programs,” according to a February report by the

County Welfare Directors Association of California to the state Senate Budget Committee. "Victims have immediate needs for clothing and safe shelter away from the abusive pimps and require long term services."

The association says at least \$20 million in state funding is need to establish an adequate infrastructure in California to raise awareness, increase prevention and provide long-term care. An additional \$14 million annually would be needed to maintain such a program.

Long term residential homes continue to be a big issue for Los Angeles County, agreed Nick Ippolito, the children and social services deputy for Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe. Along with Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, Knabe has worked to raise awareness about the issue of sex trafficking across the county.

"I don't want anybody to think we're just putting up posters," Ippolito said. "We are actively working to put those services in place."

Los Angeles County currently contracts with Crittenton Services for Children and Families in Orange County, which provides residential treatment services for abused children and homeless and/or troubled adolescents.

"The closest things we have (in Los Angeles County) are group homes and foster homes," Ippolito said. "What's generally done and we're trying to change that, is a cookie-cutter approach. We need to do something more specialized."

What Ippolito and others say has improved are the relationships that have formed between law enforcement, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, the probation department and non profit organizations all working to decriminalize prostitution.

"As more awareness comes into place and as we do start looking at the girls involved not so much as suspects but as victims, you'll start to see those changes," said LAPD Capt. Todd Chamberlain, who heads Mission Division. "But like so many social service aspects there is always a funding issue."

Chamberlain said the goal is to look beyond the criminalization of prostitution, to understand that while



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“Underneath that exterior is still a child or a young woman that we can’t take at face value,” Chamberlain said.

Stephany Powell, executive director of the Mary Magdalene Project, said she has seen the shift as well. The Van Nuys based organization helps adult women leave prostitution.

“I’m amazed by the shift,” said Powell, a former vice detective with LAPD. “It’s a good shift to an age-old problem. I think what has driven it is the spotlight on children.”

The same kind of awareness grew to help victims of child abuse and domestic violence 30 years ago, Powell said.

But she too said there are many complex reasons why teens and women turn to prostitution.

“For some it’s a choice, but it’s made because a family is not stable or solid,” she said. A bad home life and other causes are “fueling the fire,” she added.

Even fewer long term services are available for older women who want to leave prostitution than for children, Powell said. Mary Magdalene has enough funding to operate a residential home with six beds.

“Services are not so organized with the 20, 30 or 40-year-old,” she said. “They are the end result of what happens when we don’t care for the children. Somebody needs to catch them too. That adult woman has multiple arrests. Where’s she going to get a job?”

What would help too is legislation that would support the victims rights and protect them from pimps, Powell said.

“These women need more legislation that’s going to help them if they roll over on a pimp,” she said.

For Lee, running Children of the Night means protecting the youth and educating them. Some girls leave the program before graduating. Some come back.

On all the beds inside the facility

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are piles of stuffed animals.

Some of the girls who live there now say they turned to prostitution after running away from a foster home. Others said a friend lured them into having sex with men they met on the Internet. Most said they don't think of themselves as sex-trafficking

involved. Not all are young children who are kidnapped from faraway places, waiting to be rescued, she said. Some are like her girls, those who can never go home. And that's the challenge, she said.

"These children are not seen as other children," Lee said. "I want to change their lives and give them everything that other children have had."



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victims.

“I didn't know I was trafficked until I was told,” said one 17 year old, who said she thought the word trafficked had more to do with drugs.

Another said the word trafficking didn't quite fit.

“I didn't feel like it pertained to me,” a 16-year-old said. “I feel like it's something for someone who was taken against their will and not going along with it.”

Lee said their responses reflect the complexity of prostitution and those