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Rhode Island law makes it pimps' paradise

By Donna M. Hughes | Monday, August 17, 2009 |
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In June, a 16-year-old Boston runaway was found beaten in Providence. She was being held against her will in a basement apartment by a 40-year-old convict and alleged pimp. He had her stripping in a local club. In Rhode Island, there is no law that prohibits 16- or 17-year-old girls from stripping. She had a purse full of condoms, indicating she was probably being used in prostitution as well.

This girl is one of many Massachusetts girls who are trafficked into Rhode Island's sex industry, where there is no law against prostitution as long as it occurs indoors.

Prostitution was decriminalized by the General Assembly in 1980, following a sex discrimination lawsuit filed by a prostitutes' rights group. For the last several years, the sex industry has grown rapidly aided by this legal vacuum.

The clubs of lawless Rhode Island are a favorite destination for pimps because they know they can operate with near impunity.

Service providers see the connection between trafficked girls in Boston and the sex industry in Rhode Island. Lisa Goldblatt Grace, director of the My Life My Choice Project of the Justice Resource Institute in Boston, wrote in a letter to the Rhode Island Assembly: "The girls with whom I have worked have frequently talked about being brought to Providence to work. Pimps are well aware of where there is the most fertile ground to make money with the least consequences."

Rhode Island is also a destination for men from all over New England who come here to buy sex legally. Media reporting on the unique situation here has led to a dramatic increase in the exploitation of women and children in prostitution.

Lt. Roberto DaSilva has been a police officer in Pawtucket for 15 years. He said that he has seen more instances of juvenile prostitution in the last year than ever before. Troubled teens are looking to prostitution as a way to earn quick money. Pimps are selling children on the Internet and putting them to work in brothels and strip clubs.

DaSilva has seen the horror of prostitution first hand. He has entered brothels, interviewed the women, and seen the look of fear and desperation in their eyes.

He has seen a desperate mother come to the police station looking for her missing 15-year-old daughter. The girl was being advertised on Craigslist and pimped at a local

hotel. He has seen vibrant young women deteriorate and become a shell of themselves in a matter of a few years.

For years, some Rhode Island legislators have worked to close the loophole as it is called, but every year the bills die. Again this year, a bill was introduced in the House to recriminalize prostitution.

The bill grants immunity to victims of sex trafficking. It passed the House overwhelmingly. A Senate version is far weaker. It repeals all the anti-pimping laws in the state's criminal code. It passed the Senate unanimously. If that bill becomes law, Rhode Island will have completely decriminalized the sex industry.

In a letter to the Assembly, Cherie Jimenez, director of Kim's Project in Brighton, wrote:

"It seems that there is little understanding in your state of the brutal terror inflicted by pimps and traffickers."

Jimenez said she and other Massachusetts service providers will continue to address the damage prostitution inflicts on women and girls. What responsibility will Rhode Island take to address this issue?

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