

Human trafficking is central issue of women's conference

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – A 15-year-old girl in Wisconsin walked to a park near her home. She met a young man. The two young people talked, flirted, laughed. The young man offered marijuana to the girl.

In this case, as related by FBI Special Agent Minerva Shelton, the joint was probably laced with another drug. The man raped the girl. She blacked out, regaining consciousness in Chicago, where the man forced the girl into prostitution. She traveled between Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Her pimp moved her to Sacramento when she was 16.

Domestic human trafficking, as illustrated by this case, was the focal point of the first annual Catholic Women's Conference held recently at the Diocesan Pastoral Center in Sacramento. A central issue was the retrieval and treatment of children working as prostitutes in Sacramento.

"It's a national issue and it's also local," said Ms. Shelton, "and the way we're going to solve it is by people coming together to help. I'm glad that the Catholic Church is aware of the problem and taking interest."

Ms. Shelton and Sgt. Pamela Seyffert and Detective Kristi Morse of the Sacramento Police Department – all members of the department's Task Force on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors – presented the facts of life for girls ages 11 to 17 living on the streets.

As an FBI agent, Ms. Shelton focuses on children who are moved across state lines. She emphasized that girls are forced into prostitution in many different ways. "All of these girls have a story," she said.

Some are abducted. Some are lured into liaisons with men through contact on the Internet, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

But a common thread running through their stories is that many of the girls are

runaways. Some are even, as Sgt. Seyffert puts it, “thrown away,” and they have little or no self-esteem, have lived with physical or sexual abuse or severe neglect, and are looking for ways to survive.

According to Sgt. Seyffert, a girl who runs away from home more than three times has an 80 percent likelihood of being taken in by a pimp and working as a prostitute. Underage girls have no legal means of supporting themselves and they can’t rent apartments or sign legal documents.

Seyffert explained that the pimps are men who can rent apartments and hotel rooms, buy cell phones and drive cars. They refer to prostitution as “the game” and share tips with one another on how to emotionally manipulate and physically control the girls.

Many Sacramento pimps call themselves “rappers” and describe themselves as in the entertainment business. The pimps provide “protection and affection” that the girls earn by selling their bodies for sex. The children working for a pimp call him “Daddy.” The youngest girl working for a pimp in Sacramento has been 12 years old. The average age is 14.

Shelton said pimps routinely move the girls to maximize the children’s earning potential. Sacramento-area pimps take their girls to Reno, Nevada, to work the crowds at the yearly “Hot August Nights “ car show and to cash in on the casino trade.

The Sacramento Police Department treats sexually exploited children as crime victims and prosecutes pimps to the full extent of the law. But changes in the ways pimps operate have made it increasingly difficult for law enforcement to recover the girls from the pimps.

Sgt. Seyffert explained that prostitution is moving away from streetwalking and onto the Internet. Pimps are taking pictures of the girls, often heavily made up to look older than they are, and then posting ads on Web sites. The two most popular sites for online prostitution are Craigslist.com and Myredbook.com.

In her presentation, Sgt. Seyffert urged all of the women at the conference to visit

the Web sites so they will be aware of how sites enable child prostitution.

"I won't arrest you for looking at pornography on the Internet," Sgt. Seyffert said. "Just go online and see for yourselves what is happening. These are children who need adult intervention. They absolutely cannot get out of the situation by themselves
."

When asked why she wanted the women at the conference to look at the Web sites in question, Sgt. Seyffert noted: "Because for some people, once they see this, they can't not do something about it."

Warnings and disclaimers ask that anyone viewing the Craigslist site be at least 18 years old and to "report suspected exploitation of minors to the appropriate authorities." When a viewer clicks on the link, Craigslist maintains that the viewer thereby "release(s) Craigslist from any liability that may arise from (his or her) use of this site."

Craigslist did not respond to e-mail requests from the Catholic Herald, the Sacramento diocesan newspaper, for comment on child prostitution trafficking.