

Sexually exploited women find refuge in Anchorage outreach ministry

ANCHORAGE, Alaska - Many start as strippers. Some “work” out of a car, a club or by way of the Internet. And since they’re not walking the streets in Anchorage, they don’t consider themselves prostitutes. They see themselves as “sex workers.”

But despite the varied settings and nuanced terms, it’s still commercial sexual exploitation, said Nancy Cole, director of Mary Magdalene Home Alaska in Anchorage, an ecumenical Christian, nonprofit organization that provides a network of care to women leaving prostitution and sexual exploitation – a monumental task in a city where the sex trade thrives.

“There’s always been a prostitution problem in Anchorage. Period,” Cole told the Catholic Anchor, newspaper of the Anchorage Archdiocese.

Sgt. Kathy Lacey, who heads the vice unit for the Anchorage Police Department, said more than 300 arrests for prostitution occur in the city each year.

Most of the women are victims of sex trafficking, in which a person – adult or teenager – is induced into prostitution. Many are prevented from escaping their situation by force, fraud or coercion by a trafficker. Victims include both American-born and foreign-born women.

Mary Magdalene Home provides counseling and social service referrals to 50 to 60 sexually exploited women at any one time, Cole said.

For the child victims of prostitution, “we don’t have a lot of options,” said FBI agent Jolene Goeden, based in Anchorage. She helps direct the Innocence Lost Task Force, a joint effort between the FBI and Anchorage police designed to identify and rescue underage sex trafficking victims. Most minors arrested for prostitution are sent to McLaughlin Youth Center, a juvenile detention facility.

“For the most part, these are kids that are throwaway kids, they’re runaways, they’re kids that are on the street who oftentimes are not even being reported by family anymore as being missing or having run away and so there really is no place for them to go,” Goeden said.

The situation for adult women isn’t much better.

“There really is absolutely nothing in Anchorage for the woman at 2 o’clock in the morning who says, ‘I need to get out, I want to get out,’” Goeden said.

Often those caught by authorities are cited and released with a ticket and a court date. But, Goeden explained, “in order to get a woman clean enough – off of drugs and alcohol – sometimes, jail is the only option we have.”

Police try to connect each woman to social services, including drug and alcohol treatment, employment and housing. But most of the women won’t immediately accept the help, Lacey said.

“They don’t trust us because we’re arresting them,” Lacey said. “Their trafficker or their pimp has literally physically beat it into them” that the law is the enemy.

Enter Mary Magdalene Home Alaska. Founded in 1998, the home aims to help sexually exploited women transform their lives “spiritually, mentally and physically.” Clients range in age from 18 to late 50s.

“As Christians, we believe that people can and do change,” Cole said.

For many women, that starts in voluntary group meetings with volunteer case workers who visit the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center, a local prison, each week. After their release from prison, women are invited to attend a support group while Mary Magdalene workers help them find a safe, secure place to live.

After 11 years, Mary Magdalene Home has raised enough funds to purchase a safe home for women. Cole said the home, which opened in April in a residential neighborhood in East Anchorage, accommodates up to seven women at a time. Women may stay up to 18 months.

The homelike setting allows staffer members to help residents secure bus passes, finish school, build job skills and find a permanent home.

On top of life's normal challenges, the sexually exploited women deal with "all the trauma they've been through," Cole explained. That includes childhood abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic abuse, life on the street and mental health and drug and alcohol problems.

In addition to arranging outside help to heal such deep wounds, Mary Magdalene Home offers in-house spiritual guidance. Plans call for regular Bible study and prayer services to begin soon.

Ursuline Sister Lorene Griffin, a retired psychologist, volunteers as Mary Magdalene's spiritual and psychological director. She counsels women about their way of thinking, "what freedom means" and how to make good choices. A caseworker reviews with each woman her sexual and drug and alcohol histories to identify what triggers relapses.

"They're our ladies. They're women who are choosing to change their lives (and they) need people to care."