

## **Teen prostitutes get new status**

By **PAT PHEIFER** and **JIM ANDERSON**, Star Tribune staff writers

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County prosecutors from across the metro said Friday they are overhauling their policies to ensure that juvenile prostitutes are treated as crime victims instead of criminals, even as some regions of the state see an uptick in teen prostitution cases.

"We need to do the right thing as it relates to children who are victims of prostitution," said Ramsey County Attorney John Choi, who was joined at a news conference by prosecutors, police chiefs and victim advocates from across the Twin Cities. "I believe we should be doing everything we can to get them out of the system, and never come back again."

The revised policies and procedures give prosecutors new clarity and unity in direction, Choi said, because state law is contradictory in defining children involved in prostitution both as delinquents and victims of sex trafficking.

"I believe that will lead to better outcomes," Choi said. In Ramsey County, cases will be referred to the Runaway Intervention Program or child protection, he said.

"These kids are 14 going on 43 sometimes," said Pete Orput, Washington County attorney. "It's important to send them the message that they're going to be treated as crime victims."

Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom, a national leader in the field of juvenile justice issues, said protecting children is one of the most important tasks for prosecutors.

"In many ways, it's reached epidemic levels," aided by the Internet and social network websites, he said. Victim advocates say when online ads selling sex tout "fresh" and "innocent," what they mean is underage.

Average starting age: 13

A recent study by the independent research company Schapiro Group and the Women's Funding Network identified Minnesota as an "at risk" state for teen prostitution. From February to August last year, there was a 55 percent increase in girls identified as being involved in sex trafficking (from 80 to 124), and a 65 percent increase in girls trafficked through ads on the Internet (from 68 to 112), the most among three key states that were studied.

Joy Friedman, a case worker for Breaking Free, a St. Paul-based outreach and recovery group for prostituted women and girls, said the average age that a girl enters prostitution is 13. More and more, she said, she is seeing girls recruited by other juveniles. "We had an 11-year-old who was recruited by a 12-year-old," she said.

Terry Forletti, another case worker, said she has seen a dramatic increase in the past 90 days in the number of calls to Breaking Free from high school counselors, particularly at the alternative high schools, about girls who exhibit the hallmarks of prostitution. Those

signs could include a homeless girl with new, expensive clothes or a girl with bruises, likely from her pimp.

Three women, survivors of prostitution, spoke at Friday's news conference, including Heather, 31, who said she got involved in prostitution at age 15.

"It's not about criminal activity," she said. "It's about being a victim. If I had known 15 years ago that there was someplace like Breaking Free," she said, trailing off as she cried. "I'm no longer a victim of prostitution. I'm free."

'No geographic boundaries'

Choi said he hopes that getting the word out about the new procedures will help other juveniles come forward to get help without fear of being thrown into the criminal justice system.

Gene Polyak, a St. Paul police commander, said his department's focus is on the johns who seek out prostitutes. The department's website posts their photos, and runs the "john school," which educates them about the effect prostitution has on victims.

"There's no geographic boundaries to this problem," said Woodbury Police Chief Lee Vague, who sends his officers to St. Paul for training. Sting operations are routine in his city.

Backstrom, Orput and others said the new approach doesn't mean an easing in prosecution for crimes related to teen prostitution. In fact, targeting pimps and those who solicit teen prostitutes has taken on new urgency as prostitution has shifted from the inner city to suburban hotels, strip malls and appointments at private homes made over the Internet.

"In the last 10 years, Dakota County alone has prosecuted 13 adult offenders and one older juvenile who were involved in forcing children into prostitution," Backstrom said. "Those crimes will be prosecuted aggressively as we go forward."

Said Orput, "I think for a long time a lot of us thought prostitution only occurred in Minneapolis and St. Paul. I'm sorry to say, but I think we can acknowledge it's a statewide problem, particularly in our suburbs."

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