

## Jeff Bauer: Sexually exploited kids are victims

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### Commentary

Recently, county attorneys and law enforcement officials from across the metro area took the unprecedented step of publicly announcing that they would no longer prosecute juveniles for prostitution offenses but would, instead, work to connect them to support and services.

As Dakota County Attorney Jim Backstrom put it, "If we recognize that children who have been prostituted are actually victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, not offenders of delinquent acts, we can help them."

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi, whose office organized the news conference, added, "By using a victim-centered approach that is cost-effective and sound public policy for these children, we can truly give them the appropriate intervention and treatment necessary for their safety and welfare, while protecting our communities."

For many of us in the advocacy community, and certainly for the courageous survivors who told their stories at the officials' news conference, this public statement was the culmination of years of

work to protect children from epidemic increases in trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in Minnesota.

With a recent study by the Shapiro Group and the Women's Funding Network showing a 55 percent increase in the number of children being trafficked for sex in Minnesota between February and August 2010, it is clear that we need to take a new approach to the problem.

First we must remove a conflict in existing state law that treats sexually exploited children as both victims and criminals.

Under Minnesota's current child protection statutes, one definition of a "child in need of protection or services" is any child under 18 who is involved in prostitution.

On the other hand, state statutes related to prostitution treat this very same child as a criminal, allowing her to be placed in the juvenile justice system rather than in supporting programming, counseling and other services.

In light of the new victim-centered protocols for child prostitution cases, it is now time to remove the conflict from our state law and to make a clear statement that children who have been threatened and forced into prostitution are not criminals but crime victims in need of protection and support.

Following the lead of states like New York, Illinois, Washington, Connecticut and Georgia, the Family

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Partnership and other advocacy groups and service providers who work directly with commercially sexually exploited youth in Minnesota, along with legislators from both sides of the aisle, have introduced a "Safe Harbor" bill (HF 556) that does three things: It removes the existing conflict in the law to ensure sexually exploited children are not treated as criminals, it increases fines on "johns" to create a funding stream for more supportive services, and it preserves the tools prosecutors need to convict sex traffickers and pimps.

In a year where there will be plenty of honest debates and disagreements, it's time to do one thing upon which we can all agree: Protect our children from sexual exploitation.

Jeff Bauer is director of public policy for the Family Partnership.



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