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## Protect teen victims in sex trafficking

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The 28-year-old Minnesota pimp met the teenager in 2008 and recruited her to perform sex with his paying customers. The teen lived with the pimp and others for two months, working in the sex trade here and in Chicago.

The pimp, **Byronte Juwann Reed**, who was later sentenced to 15 years in prison, admitted he used force to make the girl do what he wanted.

Clearly the teen was the helpless victim of a terrible crime, but because of an inconsistency in state law she could have been prosecuted as a prostitute and placed in the juvenile-justice system rather than in a support program.

Under current laws, a child involved in prostitution can be protected by the state's child protection statutes or treated as criminal and charged with a crime.

The 2011 Legislature has the opportunity to

fix that glaring contradiction and join four other progressive states that are working to strengthen support and treatment programs that respond to increased teen sex-trafficking.

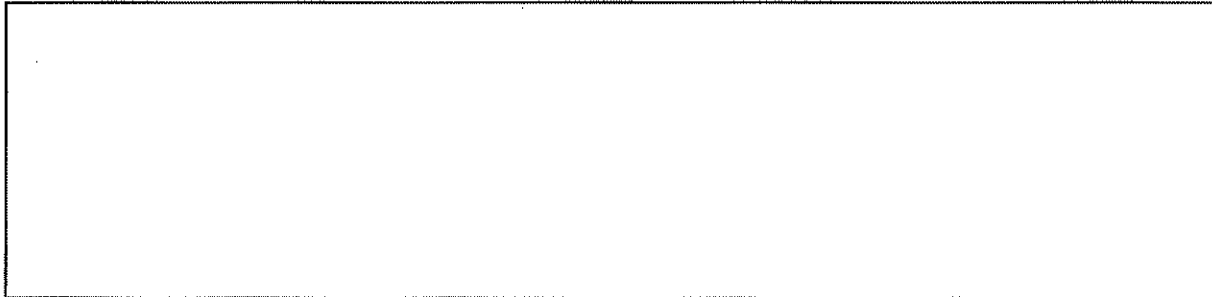
Minnesota has long been a leader in working to prevent crimes against women. A law passed in 2009 strengthened the state's **sex-trafficking laws** by increasing penalties and categorizing trafficking as a "crime of violence."


Ideally the reforms would have included the "Safe Harbor" approach outlined in a bill approved by the Minnesota House and now headed to conference committee.

In an important show of unity, county prosecutors from across the Twin Cities held a news conference in February to say they were changing their policies to treat juvenile prostitutes as victims instead of criminals.

For example, Ramsey County Attorney **John Choi** said his office would refer such cases to the county's Runaway Intervention Project or to child protection. The goal, Choi and other prosecutors said, should be to protect and treat juvenile prostitutes -- not put them behind bars.

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Often the testimony of exploited teens is key to successful prosecution of sex traffickers, and victimized teens who feel protected are more likely to cooperate.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates that 100,000 children are exploited each year for prostitution in the United States -- at an average age of 12 to 14.

"In many ways, it's reached epidemic levels," in part because of the impact of the Internet and social media, Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom said at the news conference.

Human-rights advocates in Minnesota say sex trafficking is a statewide problem. In some cases, teen prostitutes are brought here from other states or countries, but Minnesota teens are often recruited and exploited here and taken to other states.

There are myriad reasons why teens fall into prostitution, although a common thread is dysfunction at home. When teens communicate their vulnerability or availability online, they are often quickly recruited by traffickers who build trust before putting them to work and beginning a cycle of abuse that often includes violence.

In addition to removing the conflict in state law, the "Safe Harbor" legislation would increase the fines on "johns" to create a funding stream for more support and treatment services for victims, and it would retain the tools prosecutors must have to convict sex traffickers and pimps.

Minnesota would follow the lead of New York, Illinois, Washington and Connecticut.

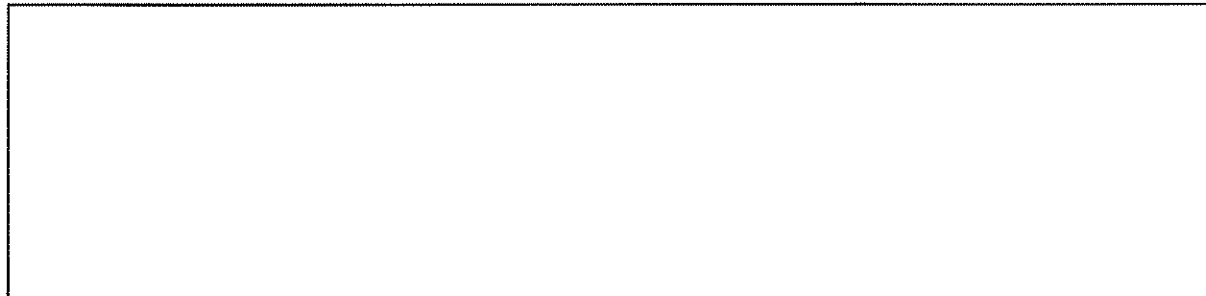
Prostitution is too often characterized as a victimless crime. When the prostitute is a teen, there should be no debate.

The proposed "Safe Harbor" legislation responds to a tragic fact of life in Minnesota: More and more teens are being sold for sex, and they need protection -- not prosecution.

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