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February 14, 2014

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POST CRIME

Sex Trafficking In Alaska 'Notoriously Underreported,' Targets Native Girls, Task Force Hears

By RACHEL D'ORO 11/05/12 09:55 PM ET EST **AP**



Alaska Attorney General Michael Geraghty, chairman of a new state task force on sex and human trafficking.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Experts testifying before a new Alaska task force on sex trafficking said Monday the teenage victims often are too afraid and embarrassed, and sometimes too addicted to drugs, to come forward.

The comments were made at a hearing to address sex trafficking, which authorities say is notoriously underreported. Among the most vulnerable are chronic runaways whose own parents have quit looking for them, said Detective Sgt. Kathy Lacey, who heads the Anchorage Police Department's vice unit.

"Those kids are falling through the cracks," she told the panel.

Jolene Goeden, an FBI special agent in Anchorage who investigates sex crimes, said there have been seven federal prosecutions of human trafficking cases, noting that not all of them were filed as trafficking cases. In the seven cases, 105 trafficking victims were identified.

Recorded conversations with a victim identified as "Heather" also were played. She said her pimp initially was treated her well and told her she would not want for anything, then the relationship deteriorated to the point where she was beaten for being even a dollar short, hogtied and gagged and thrown into an "underground tunnel" for days.

"It was brutal," she said.

The state task force aims to gauge the prevalence of human trafficking and prostitution in Alaska, as well as the services available to help victims. It also plans a December public hearing in Bethel.

State lawmakers earlier this year unanimously approved a bill that established the task force and created harsher penalties for human trafficking crimes.

The legislation, sponsored by Gov. Sean Parnell, also called for removing the label of "prostitute" from victims and changing court procedures to expedite justice and make the process easier on victims.

Authorities say victims' shame, fear of repercussions and poor support structures are some of the reasons sex trafficking goes unreported.

Authorities testifying Monday said other highly vulnerable targets are Alaska Native girls from rural communities who end up in Anchorage working, then out of innocence recruit young village girls.

Parnell has said he became aware of the issue while in Italy last year. He said he visited a shelter run by a missionary who has helped create more than 100 anti-trafficking shelters around Italy. Parnell and his wife, Sandy, began exploring the extent of the problem in Alaska and ultimately formed the legislation.

At last month's convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives, Sandy Parnell told an audience she was disturbed to learn that young Alaskans have been targeted by sex traffickers during past AFN conventions. She said the task force will report its findings to state legislators by Jan. 15.

"So what is sex trafficking?" Sandy Parnell said. "It is modern-day slavery."