

News

Kansas City to be a model city in human trafficking fight

By Marty Denzer
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Marty Denzer/Key photo

U.S. Senator Sam Brownback addresses about 200 people at a conference on Human Trafficking March 15. In the center seats behind him are three of the speakers: Kristy Childs, Detective Catherine De La Paz and Sergeant Byron Fasset.

KANSAS CITY – Not so long ago, federal law stated that an enslaved person had to be physically shackled for a charge of slavery to stick. Modern-day slavery, human trafficking, has been defined by the United Nations as the illegal trade of human beings, of all age groups, through force, fraud or coercion, for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor. Physical shackling can and does still occur, but more damaging are the mental and emotional shackles placed on a victim by a trafficker.

According to Steven Wagner, president of Renewal Forum, a Washington, D.C., non-profit organization dedicated toward the abolishment of human trafficking and the restoration of its victims, the federal government can only do so much. Most of its efforts concern immigrants and those brought into the U.S. from other countries, with not enough directed toward domestic trafficking. (The June 2009 State Department’s annual report on trafficking contained more than 220 pages on efforts to fight trafficking abroad, and less than one page on the fight against domestic trafficking.) “We need local (state) governments enacting effective laws to wither the

exploitation and local police monitoring, investigating it,” he said. Wagner was in Kansas City to facilitate a 2-day multi-disciplinary conference on human trafficking. The conference, co-sponsored by Renewal Forum, The Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan., and Veronica’s Voice, a local organization dedicated to educating, encouraging and empowering victims of trafficking and prostitution to recover their lives, was intended as a first step toward making Kansas City a model city in the effort to fight human trafficking.

The city’s Midwestern location is ideal for the model, Wagner said. “It’s the heartland, right in the middle of the country.”

Melissa Snow, of Shared Hope International, a non-profit organization founded in 1998 to serve sexually exploited women and children, had also touched on the Midwest in an interview with The Catholic Key in 2007. She said that Interstate 35 bisects the country from Laredo, Texas to Duluth, Minn., with access to east-west highways. Truck traffic on I-35 may be carrying more than meets the eye, she said.

Human Trafficking is a \$32 billion dollar crime industry world wide, running a close third behind drug and arms dealing according to the conference’s keynote speaker, U.S. Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan). Each year, between 17,500 and 20,000 men, women and children are trafficked into the United States from more than 48 source countries for purposes of sexual or labor exploitation, according to a report released in June 2007 by the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. But it is no longer just an international problem, Brownback said. The U.S. State Department estimates that more than 250,000 American citizens and legal residents, most of them children under age 18, are being trafficked within this country. Brownback noted that the Kansas City area is “becoming a hub” for traffickers and their victims, of which 80 percent are women and girls. He said many times young girls are lured by traffickers by expressions of affection: Come, be my girlfriend. Later “Be my girlfriend” metamorphoses into “Be his girlfriend, I need money, and he’ll pay for it.” Drugs can and do enter the picture, as do physical and emotional abuse and unwanted children. It’s all about relationships; often people who become victims of trafficking have blown through relationships or are casualties of familial relationships blown apart, Brownback said. Children and adults abducted or lured into sexual exploitation or forced labor become disposable, he said, as evidenced by Kevin Bales’ 1999 book, Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy. Brownback went on to say that the usual age of a trafficked child’s first exploitation is 12-13, with some as young as 9. “In many world cultures, women and children are devalued, ‘disposable.’ Too often we look at people in troubling situations as problems, instead of inherently dignified human beings, children of a living God.

“Persons become commodities,” Brownback said, “commodities to be used for utility or pleasure. Human trafficking has become a tremendously important problem that has not been handled well in this country.”

Sergeant Byron Fassett and Detective Catherine De La Paz, of the Dallas Police Department's High Risk Victims and Trafficking Child Exploitation Squad, presented the Dynamics of Domestic Prostitution/Trafficking of Children: Investigative/System Response. Fassett said that the squad routinely handles about 1,500 cases a year of sexual abuse, Internet crimes and the exploitation of children. He made it very clear that sexually exploited "children are not prostitutes; they are human beings who are victims of prostitution. It has become a national problem that is bigger than international trafficking. For every girl trafficked across international borders, there are 100 inside the U.S.," he said. He also said that "we play into traffickers hands if we only look at the home turf. We have to look at trafficking globally." It can get confusing, even to the point where people exhibit a "see no evil" reaction.

Child sex trafficking is the most overlooked form of child sexual abuse, Sergeant Fasset said. "Because we don't always notice the effects (the bruising and branding, the look in the eyes), it can be easy to dismiss these kids as bad kids." The majority of trafficked kids are chronic runaways or throwaways (children and teenagers who have become inconvenient to have around), he said.

Wagner had said much the same thing. "Most trafficked children and teens are runaways or throwaways. These are serious missing kids, and only about 1 out of 5 cases are reported to law enforcement. There are several reasons for this," he said. "Parents or relatives are embarrassed by the evidence of abuse; the child has become inconvenient or a hassle — mom has a new boyfriend; drugs or other illegal activities at home."

Traffickers have become very astute, Wagner went on, at picking up kids over the Internet or in shopping malls. "It's the law of supply and demand," he said. "The supply is met by emotionally hungry kids and the demand by men addicted to pornography and sex."

Pornography is not a victimless crime, Wagner said. "Kids are exploited in production and the result creates a demand for real live children to exploit. A great deal of child marketing occurs on the Internet, which has become the new 'street.'"

Sergeant Fasset also commented on the marketing of children through the Internet. Buying or selling a child or teenager under the age of 18 for prostitution or pornography is a "technology facilitated abuse." But what is being done about it? Not much and pimps are counting on that, he said. "Kids won't tell; adults won't listen, and even if they do listen, adults and cops won't do anything." There's a good reason why trafficked and prostituted kids won't tell, he said. More often than not the children or teens were born into a family without a father figure, mother a drug or alcohol dependent who is in an out of the child's life, raised by relatives, a chronic runaway with problems at school; the list goes on. Pimps, who usually are sociopaths, lure teens with promises of affection, attention, security and

clothes or jewelry, and lots of money. In a short time, they gain control over the young girl or woman (or boy) with physical abuse, branding, threats of reprisals against family members or themselves, monitoring by other girls, and drug addiction. “With no one to yell, ‘foul’ for these victims, what’s to stop the pimps?” Sergeant Fasset asked. “We have to yell ‘foul,’ we have to recruit these young people back to life, lure them away from ‘the life,’ and support the healing process. We must investigate, arrest and prosecute each and every pimp we can get our hands on. We have to become the pimp (theoretically), we have to understand him, his street smarts, and exceed him.”

B. Julie Johnson, Ph.D. and MPH, spoke of sexual exploitation from a survivor’s perspective. Although she has been out of “the life” for 27 years, recalling her experiences brought her to tears more than once. As a young Houston-area graduate student in fear after a home invasion, she moved around constantly for several months, staying with friends. Then she met a woman who promised her a way out, offered her safety and a way to make money. Johnson moved in with the woman, realizing after a short time that she was living in a brothel. Hiring Johnson out to men with sadistic or violent temperaments made the madam extra money, almost none of which trickled down to Johnson. Over the next 5 years, she remained in the industry, eventually becoming a call girl, which is still prostitution, she said. “It’s all the same, just different points along the spectrum. Whatever you call it, prostitution turns human beings into commodities, resulting in a hollowing out of the soul. Often the harm is invisible,” she said.

“Prostitution has been called the oldest profession. The reason for its longevity is that human beings often deny its existence. And those who extol it through books and rap music, well that’s the biggest trick they ever turned.”

Naïve people have suggested that legalizing prostitution may eventually abolish it. “In places where prostitution is legalized or ignored,” Johnson countered, “human trafficking increases because there are more venues for the trafficker.”

Author Beth Grant, of Project Rescue International, spoke about working in India for more than 25 years to rescue children sold into slavery by parents and kidnappers for sexual exploitation. “We are here today because there is hope,” she said. She spoke of the work of Project Rescue, then about the harm inherent in sexual exploitation. “It’s much more than sexual captivity,” she said. “It affects all aspects of a girl: physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally and spiritually.”

The most obvious sign is in the eyes, Grant said. “When I look in the eyes of a 12-year old girl who has been sold and raped repeatedly, day after day, I am looking into the eyes of death. She may be physically alive, but in order to survive emotionally and mentally, something inside has died.”

Laura Lederer, former senior advisor on trafficking in persons to the U.S. Undersecretary for Global Affairs in the State Department, now teaches at Georgetown Law Center and is vice president of Global Centurion, a non-governmental organization working to curb the demand side of sex trafficking, especially child sex trafficking. She also is a mom with daughters. Her focus was on reducing the demand for commercial sex in all its incarnations. “Sex trafficking is a transnational crime, and for that we need a transnational solution, she said. “We need to find out who are the perpetrators.”

Domestically, human trafficking is still virtually ignored by the media, and girls and women who are caught in investigations are usually prosecuted as criminals rather than victims. There is very little recidivism because, Lederer said, “When the guy is done he’s out of there, but the woman or girl on the street corner, she’s the one who gets arrested time after time.”

In 1993, the first case of human trafficking was brought to prosecution in this country. In 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the first comprehensive trafficking act in the world, was drafted and passed into federal law. The TVPA allowed prosecution of all the people involved in trafficking — recruiters, keepers, buyers, brothel guards — and increased penalties so traffickers can receive prison sentences of 20 years to life. It also set up a victim-centered approach, to rescue and restore victims to real life. Reauthorization of the act occurred in 2003, 2005 and 2008. But the problem is still rampant, because it is underplayed in this country. Christine Ladner, Assistant Attorney General of the State of Kansas and chair of the Kansas Human Trafficking Advisory Board said, “The bottom line is you can’t find what you’re not looking for.”

The stories are different and yet the same, said Kristy Childs, trafficking survivor and director of Veronica’s Voice, a local organization she founded in 2001 to help women and girls reclaim their lives from prostitution.

A chronic runaway trying to escape from an abusive home, she was trafficked by truckers who demanded payment for rides. Childs was 12 years old. She landed in Denver and was picked up by a pimp. At first she was grateful for a bed to sleep in since she had been sleeping on the sidewalk, but soon she was frightened, wanting to leave but afraid to. She suffered beatings, rape, humiliation and more. She and her “stable sisters” were told they were bad and deserved punishment.

“I had heard this before,” Childs said. “I was told I was bad at home, then by my pimp, johns (men who pay for sex), and when I was arrested for prostitution, law enforcement told me I was bad.

“Prostitution is what victims do,” she said, “not what they are. They are women and girls.”

Childs said the hip hop rap culture has glorified the pimp game. “There is a lot of money to be made when the girls each bring in \$500-800 a night. And with a whole stable full, that’s hundreds of thousands of dollars,” she said.

“We learn to maintain,” Childs said, “and if we can maintain we can heal.”

Never underestimate the power of survivor to survivor, she said. Childs estimates she has been in contact with more than 5,000 women and girls over the past 9 years. She advocates education, particularly in middle school, “Because it’s naïve children who will become prey. That may be easier said than done, however, since there is a bias against our population,” she said.

“It takes courage for a woman to change, but the community needs courage also, courage to change their perception of these women.” Childs summed up, “If someone would have cared enough to find out what was going on in my home, they could have stopped it before it started.”

Renewal Forum’s Steven Wagner said the organizers took recommendations for the future, both from the panel and the audience. For example, he said, “a police officer proposed creating a matrix of agencies willing to provide services to victims, which is something we will get to work on right away.”

The adequacy of the legal environment was discussed. “One of the highpoints was Sam Meier,” a counseling psychologist who facilitates men’s groups for breaking the cycles of pornography in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan., “speaking about the link between pornography and exploitation. He said that an effort addressing pornography addiction should be part of a demand reduction strategy.”

Wagner said he was “especially interested in the discussion of what could be said to young men in high school settings as part of a prevention strategy. The discussion gave the audience a chance to weigh-in, and I think was a productive feature of the conference.”

There are a growing number of NGOs and non-profit agencies directed toward recovery and healing of trafficked and prostituted adults and children. But the number of trafficking victims is also growing, unseen. In the ongoing effort to stem this tide, Wagner plans to return to Kansas City the week after Easter to “keep things moving forward.”

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