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A Disturbing Reality: Child Sex Slavery

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Child sex slavery is a real problem. Like weak gazelles on the African savannah, vulnerable girls of 13, 14, and 15 years old and younger are being targeted by adult predators and forced or induced into the sex industry. Through psychological manipulation and physical violence, these adults pervert abused and runaway children into economic engines of the sex trade who must produce \$1,000 a night in revenue at \$50 a customer.

Lest you think I'm going to ask you to pull out your checkbooks for a donation to some charity working in Darfur, or Kyrgyzstan, or Borrioboola-Gha, understand that this is a problem in Georgia. *Our* Georgia, not the former Soviet Republic.

Over the past decade, juvenile justice authorities and police have noted a significant problem of children being sexually exploited by pimps in the Southeast and especially on the streets of metropolitan Atlanta. "Commercial sexual exploitation" describes children engaging in sexual activities for money, profit or any other consideration due to the coercion or influence by an adult, syndicate or group, and it's not new to the United States. It's a problem that child advocates in other parts of the country, such as the *Children of the Night* organization in California, have been fighting for three decades. An estimated 300,000 children in the United States are current victims of commercial sex exploitation.

Children of the Night and other veterans of the fight report that children who fall into the hands of pimps often are those who have already witnessed sexual or physical abuse at the hands of their own parents. They are running away from a home life that is unbearable. And, like those weak animals on the plain, they are easy targets for the predator.

Imagine this: you're 12. Your parent has a drug problem. Your parent's "significant other" enjoys coming in your room late at night when your parent is passed out. Every time you get angry about it and try to vent, your parent either hits you or calls the police and has you locked up in the youth detention center. Your whole life has been like this, and you're angry about it. What would you do? Like many children of troubled families, you run away. Unfortunately, you will likely go from the frying pan to the fire.

Half of runaways are approached for sex and prostitution within 48 hours of hitting the streets, experts say. Records of recent federal pimp prosecutions in Atlanta reveal a world in which adult men and women lure these girls and boys in with offers of friendship, money, or drugs and then beat them into submission with coat hangers and baseball bats.

Here in Georgia, there's a new campaign to end the sexual exploitation of these children. It's called "A Future. Not a Past." (AFNAP), and it's a public-private partnership of the Juvenile Justice Fund, the Atlanta Women's Foundation, and the Anderson Family Foundation. AFNAP is kicking off the campaign with a series of law enforcement roundtables around the state. These discussions are designed to see just how AFNAP can help police, prosecutors, judges, and child advocates make a difference in the fight against child sexual slavery.

"Georgia has very stiff penalties for those who exploit children through prostitution," says AFNAP coordinator Kaffie McCulloch. "We will be using these laws, along with better access to victim services, to protect our children." AFNAP's approach is to motivate both the average Georgian and the high-level policymaker to join the fight end child prostitution. Part of its goal is to establish a regional assessment center where victims of child sexual slavery can find respite, comfort, and especially treatment.

In a state where preliminary studies indicate that over 200 children each month are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, Georgia badly needs this assessment center. After all, think of what these children have already been through: many are fleeing abuse and really have no homes to return to; most have suffered the nightmares of multiple rapes and beatings; all will require intensive therapy just for the hope of a "normal" life.

A century and a half ago, our nation fought a war over the plague on this state that was slavery. Unfortunately, slavery is again rearing its ugly head in Georgia, this time in the form of commercial child sexual exploitation. It's time to wage war again. If you're up to the challenge, join the campaign by visiting www.afuturenotapast.org to see how you can help. Or contact us on the web at www.gachildadvocate.org to learn other ways you can help Georgia's children in need.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org