

## **School provides haven for child sex workers**

San Francisco tries to get girls off the street and change their lives.

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Published November 6, 2005 *Sacramento Bee*

SAN FRANCISCO - In an abandoned classroom, six desks stand empty. On a round table nearby, a thick skein of fluffy, bright pink yarn lies next to a pair of knitting needles. SAT prep guides and textbooks line bookshelves in the cheerfully painted room. An hour before, the class was a hub of activity, as the instructor worked to bring direction and purpose to her pupils' lives. In advance of a reporter's visit, however, they all filed out to sequester themselves in another room.

What these girls want most, right now, is privacy to rebuild their devastated lives. Several months ago, the six girls enrolled in this program-of-last-resort for juvenile delinquents were reporting to pimps and working the streets until late at night. Most had cycled in and out of the juvenile justice system for years. They're among an estimated 3,000 girls and boys involved in commercial sexual exploitation in San Francisco, including prostitution, escort services, stripping, pornography or exchanging sex for rent and food, according to a 2003 Board of Supervisors report.

San Francisco officials, frustrated with these youth being treated as criminals while their customers and pimps often walked away charged with minor infractions, decided to embark on a new way to address what they view as child sexual abuse. What began with a 2001 coalition to address the prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation of teenagers in San Francisco led to the September opening of the Safe Home and School for Girls, a novel treatment program expected to inspire widespread replication.

Without the Safe Home, in 10 years these girls would likely be addicted or dead, said Norma Hotaling, the founder of the nonprofit SAGE Project and a former prostitute. SAGE, in partnership with the Edgewood Center for Children and Families, administers the Safe Home.

She cited recent cases where girls selling sex were found dead in trash and recycling bins. As for the majority that survive "They'll just age beyond anything you can imagine," said Hotaling. "If they're 15 now, they'll be 25 but look like they're 45."

These young women will likely be addicted to illegal drugs, losing their teeth and even their sanity, while enduring regular beatings by their pimp. Hotaling said she has a metal plate on the side of her head and wires in her body due to such beatings.

"Twenty-five is when they start aging out of being worthy of a pimp, of being a money-maker," Hotaling said. "But they're still looking for love from them, so they get treated really, really badly."

Hotaling bristles at the term "child prostitute." "It's a stigma," she said. "It's like they're the problem, that they're immoral. But they're children, and it's time for adults to have some logic and some principles and take the correct stand to protect them."

Kamala Harris, San Francisco's district attorney who earlier in her career represented sexually abused minors, has taken a lead in reforming the legal system so that it views children working in the sex trade as victims, not perpetrators.

"Let's not look at the young people engaged in this activity as criminals. Let's recognize that the pimps and the johns are the criminals," Harris said. Nor is it a petty crime, she added; it's child sexual abuse.

As part of that reform, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2004 signed AB 3042, which Harris and SAGE co-sponsored, permitting prosecutors to seek an additional one-year sentence for those committing felony sex offenses against minors involved in prostitution.

Few people realize the extent of commercial sexual exploitation of children in

the United States, Harris said.

"The issue of child sexual assault is where the issue of domestic violence was 25 years ago," she said. "It's much more prevalent than anyone wants to acknowledge. And it completely damages the victim."

The Safe Home's roughly \$1 million annual starting budget is funded through city and private grants. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom pledges to expand the program to include another six girls within a year. The rehabilitation includes housing, trauma counseling, substance abuse treatment and enrollment at a school that specializes in working with emotionally traumatized youth. There's currently no comparable program for boys.

The home, in an attractive, safe and undisclosed San Francisco neighborhood, houses the six girls, ages 12 to 17, and round-the-clock, all-female staff. Each girl will likely stay eight to 12 months before being transferred to stable housing, but can stay longer if needed, said Laurel Freeman, the house administrator.

The Safe Home is a group home run by peers who also have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence. Residents aren't locked up but must follow strict rules regarding curfews, school attendance, chores and behavior. Activities include trips to the farmers market or a "documentary night," when the girls pick out a documentary to watch.

Each day at 6 p.m., a four-course meal is served, sometimes prepared by the girls. The small, tidy rooms, each with two twin beds, are adorned with corkboards pinned with photos, cartoons, postcards and other memorabilia. A few beds hold stuffed animals, another a heart-shaped pillow. Each room has soothing views of the ocean in the distance.

The peer counselors said the girls also learn to build female friendships in the program.

"These girls have been totally brainwashed to not trust each other," Freeman said. "The pimps want to keep the girls fighting, because it makes more money. They all hung out with guys, so they don't have that female bonding."

Sexually exploited youth "end up being individuals who have become very distrustful, very cynical and abrasive." Harris noted. "In their very short lives, they've had some of the worst experiences at the hands of other human beings who are in a position of trust. But also, because of their youth, they're totally amenable to redirection and to rehabilitation."

It's too soon to gauge the success of the program, but one young resident said she wants to become a therapist, while another is considering entering nursing. With the encouragement of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif, the Department of Justice gave a vote of confidence to the Safe Home design by providing SAGE with a \$1.25 million grant to replicate the model in other U.S. cities.

Hotaling is hopeful that, as these and future residents of the Safe Home program move on to successful lives, they'll form the vanguard of a movement to expose the prevalence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and its human toll.