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Program in Boston targets men who buy sex

City aiming to cut prostitution by 20% in two years

By **Zachary T. Sampson** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 04, 2014

Boston is instituting a program to reduce prostitution by targeting men who buy sex instead of the women who provide it, officials announced Tuesday.

The city is partnering with Demand Abolition, a Cambridge-based group led by former US ambassador Swanee Hunt, to end human trafficking by stifling demand rather than by punishing sex workers. The goal of the public-private partnership is to reduce demand for prostitutes in Boston by 20 percent in two years.

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The project will involve collecting data on the solicitation of prostitutes, and a team of local leaders, which has not yet met, will make recommendations for specific awareness and enforcement measures.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh said traditional ways of combating prostitution have long involved criminal punishment that leads to a cycle of sustained vulnerability for sex workers.

“In Boston, we will not tolerate buying or selling of human beings,” he said at an antitrafficking summit Tuesday morning in the Hotel Commonwealth.

Boston is one of four cities working with Demand Abolition, which identifies prostitution as a form of human trafficking. The other participants are Denver, San Francisco, and Seattle, a spokesman said.

Solicitation largely occurs online, so the groups will use data-scraping technology to see how many men are visiting websites such as backpage.com and Craigslist in search of sex, said Lina Nealon, director of policy and outreach for Demand Abolition. Cities will also employ such measures as staking out a known brothel to count how many visitors go in and out.

A demand-side approach to enforcement can be effective because it focuses on those with

the most to lose, said Donna Gavin, a sergeant detective in the Boston police human trafficking unit.

“These are people that are usually more affluent, have jobs, careers, and families that they’re definitely risking by being involved and fueling the violent industry,” Gavin said.

The sex workers and pimps, however, “don’t feel like they have anything to lose,” she said.

Prostitutes are often poor teens and young women who are addicted to drugs, have low self-esteem, or limited upward mobility and fall under the control of violent pimps and johns, said Hunt, the former US ambassador to Austria.

“We are not going to be able to stanch that flow in my lifetime, in my great-grandchildren’s lifetime, in terms of the girls who are vulnerable,” Hunt said, emphasizing that people should view trafficking as an extension of domestic violence.

“It is about men feeling entitled to treat a female, a girl or a woman, as they wish,” Hunt said.

Boston police “too often [see] these young girls out” in sections of Dorchester and South Boston “who are all addicted, who are in need of services, and locking them up isn’t the solution,” said Commissioner William B. Evans. He said the 20 percent reduction in demand for paid sex is a realistic goal for the city in the next couple of years.

The face of human trafficking has long been a foreign national smuggled into the United States from a faraway place, but that is not a complete picture, said Cherie Jimenez, a survivor of the sex industry who counsels prostitutes in Boston. Most sex workers in the city grew up here, she said.

Jimenez is a member of the team that will help develop the city’s policy. Nealon said some approaches to targeting johns might involve increasing arrests, improving education, and buyer intervention programs.

The city’s adoption of a demand-side approach is in line with a global trend toward stricter punishment for men who solicit sex, those involved with the program said. In 2011, Massachusetts leaders signed a human trafficking law that increased penalties for johns.

But few offenders have received harsher sentences under the law. Recent statistics for arrests or prosecutions for solicitation in Boston were not available Tuesday.

Jake Wark, a spokesman for the Suffolk district attorney’s office, said prosecutors in Boston seek strict punishments for johns, including at least a \$1,000 fine in every case.

“At sentencing for similarly situated men acting as johns and women working in prostitution, we seek more serious penalties for the johns,” he said.

In February, Suffolk prosecutors successfully tried a case against two Roxbury men charged with human trafficking. Authorities said at the time that it was the first conviction under the new law.

The men, Tyshaun McGhee, 33, and Sidney McGee, 30, targeted drug-addicted women for their prostitution website, promising the women narcotics and money in exchange for sexual activity with clients. After the women had sex with different men, prosecutors said, McGhee and McGee kept the money for themselves.

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