

Peg Langhammer: A community response to sex trafficking

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By Peg Langhammer

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), more commonly known as sex trafficking, is growing at an alarming rate across the country and here in Rhode Island.

Day One has seen a steady increase in the number of referrals for child victims of exploitation, and our numbers reflect the national statistics. Most of the cases that enter our clinical program are girls between the ages of 14 and 16 (who started in the life even younger than that), and the majority of victims we see in our state are U.S. residents.

Child sex trafficking occurs when minors (under the age of 18) are commercially sexually exploited through prostitution, pornography, and/or erotic entertainment. Child pornography is a significant problem in Rhode Island, made more rampant through social media. It's estimated that up to 90 percent of children who are forced into trafficking have already been victims of sexual abuse.

It's clear we need to take action. At Day One, that's exactly what we are doing.

Home to Rhode Island's only children's advocacy center (CAC) with locations across the state, Day One's commitment to children remains a top priority. We know that multi-disciplinary interventions, especially when provided in a neutral, child-friendly CAC setting, help promote less anxiety, fewer interviews, increased support, and more appropriate referrals for needed services.

As one of only three organizations nationally to receive a discretionary grant from the National Children's Alliance for the development and implementation of CSEC protocols and programs, Day One recognizes the burgeoning problem of CSEC in our communities and we're taking aggressive steps to address it:

Last December, Day One initiated a statewide trafficking task force designed to combat human trafficking through a collaborative team approach. Partnering with law enforcement, the state Department of Children Youth and Families, the U.S. attorney's office, the state attorney general, and the Lawrence A. Aubin Sr. Child Protection Center at Hasbro Children's Hospital, our goal for the task force is to create a plan for prevention, intervention, education and outreach. All of these elements are currently separate in our state.

We've engaged My Life, My Choice and the SEEN (Support to End Exploitation Now) program, both based in Boston, to provide training for task force members, CAC multi-disciplinary team members and others to address the pervasive problem of CSEC. The knowledge gained from these successful, evidence-based CSEC programs will ensure professionals and their respective agencies know how to best respond, refer and support victims through the entire process.

We plan to develop a support program for victims to help them succeed in their endeavors through a mentorship program. My Life, My Choice credits much of its success to having survivors mentor girls going through similar circumstances. Similarly, Day One will offer a group format in which survivors can gain strength from each other.

We will create a centralized access program for victims here in Rhode Island that emulates the cutting edge protocol of the SEEN program, which aims to achieve four specific goals:

- Empower victims to leave their exploiter and find ways to regain control in their lives.
- Ensure victims' physiological and psychological safety.
- Apprehend and prosecute exploiters.
- Address and acknowledge the larger social issues impacting children at risk for CSEC through education and policy reform.

CSEC is real and it's happening right here in our state. CSEC is a multi-billion dollar industry; pimps are earning hundreds of thousands of dollars each year from selling minors.

We can address the problem through education and awareness, but it will take the entire community to put an end to this. It's time to talk about it and protect our children.

Peg Langhammer is the executive director at Day One, Rhode Island's only agency organized specifically to address sexual assault and abuse as a community concern.