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Bill would erase prostitution conviction from record

A bill that would vacate prostitution convictions for women trying to rebuild their lives is one of several addressing human trafficking.

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Danielle Goodwin says a victim shouldn't be punished.

Police "who were meant to protect me threw me in jail as if this was a life I chose."

"I didn't," she told members of the state Senate Law and Justice Committee at a hearing Monday on a bill that would vacate prostitution convictions for women who are trying to rebuild their lives. It is one of several bills in the Legislature this year that address human trafficking.

Goodwin said she never wanted to be a prostitute.

Neither did Noel Gomez, who was 16 when the man she called her boyfriend forced her into prostitution.

Five years later, she got away from him. But she said it was difficult to get away from that way of life.

"I didn't know anything else. I didn't think I could live in the real world or do a real job," she said.

For Gomez, it meant 10 more years working as an escort and in strip clubs. Today, she advocates for other victims of human trafficking and prostitution through the Organization for Prostitution Survivors, which she co-founded.

Many young women trying to rebuild their lives are burdened by prostitution convictions. As many as 500 teenagers, some as young as 11, are forced to work as prostitutes in King County.

Most job and housing applications require background checks, and people with prostitution convictions often are turned away.

"It's a huge barrier," said Gomez, who still has a charge on her record from 1991.

House Bill 1292, which passed in the state House 94-1, would allow victims to petition a judge to clear their criminal records of prostitution-related convictions.

Rep. Tina Orwall, D-Des Moines, is prime sponsor of the measure. "It's a good next step for us as we're trying again to help these young women rebuild their lives," she said.

The bill could go a long way toward helping women stay off the streets, said Melissa Farley, founder of the San Francisco-based Prostitution Research and Education, a national organization committed to abolishing prostitution and providing alternatives, including medical care for prostitutes.

In many U.S. cities, there is a 75 percent overlap between homelessness and prostitution, she said.

Former SeaTac Police Chief Jim Graddon testified in support of the bill. Law-enforcement officials, he said, are starting to think of prostitutes as victims and not criminals.

“The true victims are those who are forced into this form of slavery by others who would take advantage of them,” he said.

No Senate action has been taken on the bill.

Several bills relating to human trafficking are moving through the Legislature this session.

House Bill 2644 is aimed at protecting immigrants from human trafficking and other forms of forced labor by criminalizing coercion of involuntary servitude.

Passed in the state House 87-10, the measure makes it a crime to force someone into performing labor by withholding or threatening to withhold or destroy immigration documents or by threatening to tell law enforcement that someone is in the United States illegally.

House Bill 1791 would designate human trafficking as a sex offense and require traffickers to register as sex offenders. The state House unanimously passed the measure.

In 2003, Washington became the first state to pass a law criminalizing human trafficking.

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