

Tri-Cities to implement statewide protocol to deal with sex trafficking victims

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By Tyler Richardson, Tri-City Herald

A new statewide protocol introduced in the Tri-Cities Friday aims to bring consistency to dealing with underage victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

The Center for Children & Youth Justice drafted the protocol, which is being introduced as one of the first of its kind in the nation, after holding a series of summits across the state.

The Tri-Cities is one of five cities and counties statewide where task forces are being trained to use the protocol.

The Tri-City task force is the Tri-Cities Coalition Against Trafficking, which was created in September and includes a variety of agencies coming together to identify how to best deal with the human sex trafficking problem.

The protocol focuses on dealing with and providing resources to underage children who are sexually exploited. Many officials in the state and the Tri-Cities say the protocol is a well-crafted, comprehensive blueprint that will help create standards and raise the understanding of underage sex trafficking.

"This is the first (protocol) around our state that has our credibility because they reached out to people who were involved," said Linda Smith, former congresswoman and president of Shared Hope International. The nonprofit's main focus is ending sex trafficking.

"They didn't do this in a vacuum. They went to community after community and they listened," said Smith.

She said another reason the protocol is gaining credibility is because it was spearheaded by retired state Supreme Court Justice Bobbe J. Bridge, president and CEO of the Center for Children & Youth Justice.

One of the protocol's key goals is to establish standards for "first responders," the people who first make contact with the victims, so they can better identify the problem, provide resources and get victims to a safe location.

"In the past, victims have been treated as criminals," said Terri Kimball, with the center.

Another key element to the protocol is training and educating the different task forces in the state to make sure they are pooling resources.

On Friday, the Tri-City task force had its first training.

Tirsa Butler, co-chairwoman of the Tri-Cities Coalition Against Trafficking, said the group is taking a "SWAT team approach" to a problem that is more common than people think.

"One of the hard parts about human trafficking is that there aren't any hard numbers," she said. "What we do know is that it is here."

Butler said the Tri-Cities sees sex trafficking most prominently in the gang culture, within families and with girls who have been "pimped."

Prosecutors throughout the state, including Benton County Prosecutor Andy Miller, also played a pivotal role in developing some of the language in the protocol that deals with prosecuting those who exploit kids.

Miller said prosecuting the crimes is difficult and he hopes the protocol will lead to more convictions.

Smith said the protocol -- coupled with state Senate Bill 5669 which, if it passes, will tighten trafficking laws -- will make Washington one of the strictest states in the nation on human sex traffickers.

"Washington is taking on a huge change," she said. "If you think about coming here to buy commercial sex, we are going to get you and put you in jail."