

Lessons of child-prostitution scandal

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For those who toil daily in the overburdened and underfunded child welfare system, the recent scandal involving foster youth being lured into prostitution hits hard. Notwithstanding the egregious actions of the pimps and Johns who prey on these



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vulnerable youth, their cases call into question whether the individuals and organizations involved with them missed the red flags.

As it turns out, in this instance, the "system" identified the signs of exploitation and took swift action. Thankfully, the group home parent had received training and was able to identify the red flags of child exploitation, which include: numerous calls/texts from unknown persons, new adult boy-friends and increase in runaway incidents.

Although this tragic situation is a wake-up call for all of us to become more educated and in-

formed about the signs and signals of human trafficking, it should also sound the alarm that we — as a system and community — are not doing enough to prevent such exploitation in the first place.

First, we need to critically evaluate whether it is appropriate for abused and neglected youth to live in "congregant" or "group" care rather than with individual foster families. According to news reports, the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) is going to review "all aspects" of its group homes and work to recruit more foster parents in order to reduce the need for this living arrangement. This is reassuring, but it shouldn't be a surprise that group homes are not nearly capable of offering each youth the love, attention, focus and protection that only a family-like setting can offer.

These kids are tough. Many have experienced incomprehensible pain, rejection and violence along with chronic neglect and instability. They act out physically and sexually, run away or run back



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home and are extremely difficult to live with at times. More foster parents need to be recruited and all need to receive intensive, specialized training and support in order to help young people weather the inevitable storms of defiant behavior, rejection of caregivers and effects of trauma.

The kind of support that kids require in order to minimize the likelihood of exploitation is well-known by those in child welfare, including educational and employment support, extracurricular

activities, weekly family visitation, and mentoring.

Many of these preventive measures are addressed during regular required "review hearings." For almost 15 percent of the children in care, these review hearings are conducted by the Citizen Review Panels of Foster Care Review, Inc. Volunteers from across the community are trained by FCR's staff and commit one day a month to review children's experience in foster care. During the hour-long hearing, volunteers comprehensively

explore the youth's educational environment and achievement, including their involvement in school activities and tutoring.

They discuss the child's living environment as well as visits with biological parents, siblings and extended family. They ask children about their interests and aspirations, and discuss opportunities to encourage success through employment, further education and qualified mentors. They closely examine mental, physical, dental and visual

health documentation and recommend interventions when needed.

The culmination of this exhaustive review is a set of recommendations provided to the judge. In FY 2010-2011, 100 percent of the panels' recommendations were accepted by the judiciary and thus became formal orders of the court.

Foster Care Review's volunteers and the citizen review process are a viable line of defense in the prevention and identification of exploitation. However, the exploitation of youth in foster care is not just a child welfare system problem to solve — it is a community problem.

We need more foster parents willing to take in youth so that group homes become obsolete. We need more concerned citizens to volunteer to serve as citizen reviewers, mentors, tutors and Guardians ad Litem. And, we all need to know and be on the lookout for the signs and signals of exploitation in order to prevent our most vulnerable youth from being re-victimized.

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