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## Bill would require DCF referral of children involved in prostitution

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Dozens of minors under age 18 have been found to be involved in sex trafficking in recent years, officials and advocates say, and their first contact with authority often is the police. A proposed law would for the first time require that the state Department of Children and Families be notified of such cases.

"Law enforcement is the most likely entity to come into contact with these victims and DCF is best suited to provide help to these victims," said Stacey Violante Cote, an attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy.

Police would be required to report to DCF immediately when they arrest a minor for prostitution.

"It is important that law enforcement make DCF their first point of so they can immediately investigate a case of a child who has been arrested for prostitution and more rapidly provide them with services that they need to begin the restoration process," said Nicole von Oy, training and outreach coordinator at Love146, a non-profit organization.

Prior to Connecticut's Safe Harbor Law last year, "Connecticut law allowed children of any age to be prosecuted for prostitution," says a new report from Connecticut Voices for Children.

Now with the Safe Harbor Law children under the age of 18, who are sexually abused, are entitled to protection under Connecticut's child welfare system, the report says.

The report adds that in most cases, law enforcement agencies treat children who are prostituted as victims and don't try to prosecute them.

Barbara J. Claire, the legal director of DCF, told the legislature's Select Committee on Children that the department already is aware of dozens of cases.

"Over the past two years, the department has become aware of over 65 cases of youth involved in domestic minor sex trafficking activity," she said.

Many already are under DCF care.

"Most of these children are already in the department in one way or another," said William Rivera, the director of DCF's Division of Multicultural Affairs. These children go AWOL from group homes and residential centers and end up coming back, Rivera said.

While AWOL, many work as prostitutes, he said.

Other children working in prostitution are invisible: No one is counting the homeless children that don't get committed to DCF, Violante Cote said.

State Rep. Juan R. Candelaria, D-New Haven, asked during a public hearing if the pimps exploiting the children were being prosecuted.

The FBI and other task forces are working together and have several cases, Rivera said. He said that none have been prosecuted using Connecticut's statutes.

Rivera said the biggest impact of the bill would be on law enforcement, not DCF.

"We are pretty much doing what the legislation is saying we do, screening and investigating," Rivera said. "This bill is primarily made to give law enforcement agencies some direction."

The bill has been approved by the Select Committee on Children and referred to the Judiciary Committee.

Human Services

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