

CYL co-sponsors human trafficking workshop at UConn Stamford

By MATT COYNE

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STAMFORD -- Roughly 50 social workers left UConn Stamford armed with new knowledge in the fight against minor sex trafficking and teenage homelessness on Tuesday, Oct. 23.

The workshop, sponsored by the Brien McMahon High School Center for Youth Leadership (CYL), the Stamford Youth Services Bureau and the state Department of Children and Families (DCF), tackled the issues with speakers from the DCF, the Center for Children's Advocacy and Love 146, a New Haven-based human trafficking prevention organization.

The federal government estimates 200,000 American children are coerced into the sex trade each year. They come from any background, though most tend to be black teenaged girls. In Connecticut, DCF numbers suggest there have been approximately 100 minor sex trafficking victims since 2008.

"I learned more about specific language to use to advocate and gained more knowledge of the support systems available," said Jessica Jarhian, the director of Family Advocacy at Stamford Academy, a Domus Foundation-run charter high school.

Jarhian said the issues tackled at the workshop are things that come up at Stamford Academy, which serves students who struggle in more traditional classrooms. She said she now has more resources to help those students.

"For me, I did a lot of referrals because I didn't have much," Jarhian said. "Now I feel like I have a better understanding of the law and how to use it to help students.

"With human trafficking, I had one perception before I walked in here, now I have another," added Jarhian. "Maybe it's not as poster as I thought it is, but now I know about red flags and certain behaviors."

Bob Kocienda, director of the CYL, said the workshop was especially important as victims of the estimated \$32 billion a year industry have specific and significant issues.

"Working with kids who are trafficked is such a specialized area," Kocienda said.

"Talk to any professional who works with abused teens. Trafficked children have many, many more significant issues long term. That's why we felt it was so important to have professionals here so they can identify the issues."

The UConn workshop also attempted to frame trafficking as a domestic issue, not just one that affects women in far-flung countries. The DCF report given to attendees cites the attention paid to trafficking in Cambodia and Thailand, but notes that it is "less widely understood" domestically.

"We are really out on a consistent basis, trying to reach out to adults, educators and health professionals to provide information," Nicole von Oy, a community educator with Love 146, said in an interview. "They often see it as more of an international issue than a domestic issue."