Iowa View: State is at a crossroads for sex-trafficking

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The tranquility of an Iowa winter is something of a given for all of us fortunate to live here. We might complain about the danger of icy roads from time to time, but generally feel we live in a safe, quiet state. A sobering fact is that the very location of Iowa makes it the most dangerous place in the United States for the sex-trafficking of children, mostly young girls ages 11 to 14.

Iowa is the perfect hiding place for this crime due to several factors, according to Michael Ferjak of the Iowa attorney general’s office: We have a low per capita presence of law enforcement, and we live in the center of the country, at the crossroads of Interstate Highway 35 and Interstate 80, an easy way to arrive and disappear fast in four directions.

Vans and trucks carrying trafficked young girls pass through Iowa regularly, moving from motels to truck stops to strip clubs and other locales. Often these girls have been abused or are runaways from dysfunctional homes, lured by “rescuing” pimps who prey in shopping malls, Internet chat rooms, youth shelters or on the streets.

What’s offered, according to young victims, is “a new life, cash, travel, nice clothes” — or to have a “boyfriend” who will take care of them.

What the girls naively enter into is a life of pure hell. They’re groomed and dressed immediately and sent out for sale to waiting johns. Victims are sold an average of 10 to 15 times a night to make the money their pimps demand. They are gang-raped, often caged, and beaten if they try to leave.

It’s been shown through online monitoring by law enforcement that when business conventions occur, and during the Iowa State Fair, traffic on sites offering “escorts,” “wild girls” or “good times” intensifies with the goal of selling girls here.

A single Internet search found more than 200 escort services operating in Iowa. In fact, federal statistics note that trafficking is one of the world’s fastest-growing organized crime activities, second only to drugs, and surpassing the sale of guns and other weapons.

When trafficked children can be rescued, emotional and physical needs are overwhelming, with post-traumatic stress disorders and traumatic bonding,
sexually transmitted diseases and other illnesses, and scars from broken bones and burns among the repercussions.

Victims are threatened not to cooperate with law enforcement or they will be killed or their family terrorized. Safe housing, extended support services, and long-term commitment to the restoration of these children are paramount.

**When the Chrysalis Foundation was created** in 1989 to empower girls and women, our founders could never have envisioned a world, decades later, in which depravity of this nature and the safety of young girls would be preeminent needs. Although many think this happens only overseas in other countries, the hard facts are that the United States has become a country of origin, destination and transit for an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 underage girls and women being sold for sex right now across the nation.

Our culture has changed so dramatically with the advent of the Internet, early sexualization of girls, and abuse of children, that the month of January has been designated by the president for public awareness of human trafficking in our country.

Under direction of the Iowa attorney general, a statewide task force was created to address this critical issue in our state, and the Chrysalis Foundation is a lead participant. The Human Trafficking Enforcement and Prevention Initiative, led by Michael Ferjak, intends to build public awareness and prevention, identify and prosecute traffickers, and restore the lives of victims of human trafficking in Iowa. Its moniker, “Operation Detour,” works to make Iowa the most hostile state in the nation for human traffickers.

This is an urgent conversation whose time has come, with all of us who care about children taking a seat at the table.

**THE AUTHOR:**

MARTI SIVI of Des Moines is a member of the board of directors of the Chrysalis Foundation, which, with Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller’s office, sponsored a three-day conference on sex-trafficking. Contact: martisivi@aol.com.