

Human trafficking a big problem, panel says

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Whether they are undocumented immigrants exploited for their labor or youths from other states exploited for sex, human trafficking is a big problem in the Northwest, a panel at Willamette University concluded Thursday.

The extent of the problem is unclear. One news report minimized it, but a 2010 broadcast report by Dan Rather dubbed Portland as “Pornland.”

A 2013 study by Portland State University researchers counted 469 juveniles — 96 percent of them female — caught up in sex trafficking between 2009 and 2013.

“We know it is bad,” said Joel Shapiro, a former deputy district attorney in Multnomah County and chief counsel for U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. “We don’t know where it is worse.”

As an advocate for Shared Hope International, based in Vancouver, Wash., Shapiro and others in a coalition persuaded Oregon lawmakers in 2013 to make it a felony to purchase sex from someone under 18.

Tanith Rogers leads the FBI’s Child Exploitation Task Force, which includes police from several agencies. She said it too aims at the exploiters of sex: “We don’t ever charge a child.”

But the problem extends beyond youth. The U.S. attorney for Oregon has two task forces, one aimed at sexual exploitation and the other at labor exploitation.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Hannah Horsley, who leads the second task force, said victims of the latter crime are usually adults born outside the United States — and often in this country without documents — who speak little or no English and are isolated from others. She said family members are often found to be complicit in selling the labor of relatives.

“It really is slavery,” she said.

But she said in her 16 years as a federal prosecutor, human trafficking is a more complex crime than she anticipated. “It’s really a harder proposition than we may be giving it service today,” she said.

The panel was sponsored by Willamette University law school and the Mary Leonard Law Society, the Marion County arm of Oregon Women Lawyers.

As a lawyer for Wyden, Shapiro drafted legislation that authorized federal aid for services to victims of exploitation.

A modified version was attached to the renewal of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013, after Shapiro left Wyden’s office, but is yet to be funded.

Chanpone Sinlapasai, a Lake Oswego lawyer who specializes in immigration cases, said “sometimes I

feel like a social worker,” given the needs of her clients for services as well as legal representation.

Shannon Meyer, a crime victim specialist for the FBI, said she tries to line up services for exploited people who seek personal safety, housing and emotional support.

Gwynne Skinner, a Willamette law professor who leads its International Human and Refugee Rights Clinic, said services need to be expanded for those exploited and criminal and financial penalties increased for those who do the exploiting — including those who purchase sex.

But she said many of those who are exploited endured sex abuse as children and are caught in a foster-care system that shuffles them from home to home.

“We need to find the political will to achieve prevention and punishment,” she said.

Horsley, the federal prosecutor who leads the task force against labor exploitation, said the extent of the problem can seem overwhelming.

“We have adopted the strategy that if we can help one victim — if we can prevent the exploitation of one person — that would be huge in the life of a human being,” she said.

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