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Sex trafficking: helping girls like Lacy

The "Do you know Lacy?" national ad campaign brings much-needed visibility to issue of sex trafficking of American girls. We may not know Lacy but we can help girls like her.

NEW in-your-face billboards in Seattle raise awareness about sex trafficking and are a welcome approach to amplifying an oft-hidden issue.

Sex trafficking of young girls has grown into a billion-dollar industry hidden from public view. It is time to shine the spotlight.

The billboard ads feature a young girl. Her name, Lacy, is a pseudonym representing every American girl lured into the sex trade.

The "Do you know Lacy?" ad campaign comes from Shared Hope International, an anti-trafficking organization founded by former U.S. Rep. Linda Smith in 1998. After leaving office, Smith put her trademark tenacity and courage toward this issue. Smith's fearless voice and sharp grasp of trafficking is needed to amplify calls to end this heinous crime.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children, via the Internet, strip clubs, escort services or street prostitution — is awful stuff. Washington has been a leader in using public policy and law-enforcement methods to crack down on traffickers and rescue victims.

Credit law enforcement, social-service providers and lawmakers, including Seattle City Councilman Tim Burgess and state Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, for coordinated and resourceful efforts. The Seattle Police Department has become a regional and national resource on combating sex trafficking.

Seattle innovatively blended a mix of public and private funding to open a long-term residential and recovery program for young victims.

Trafficking is prevalent along the Interstate 5 corridor and King and Clark counties have been aggressively targeting pimps and johns. Seattle police rescued 81 young victims last year. Enhanced sentencing rules were used recently to convict two pimps and sentence them to lengthy terms.

Suburban cities constrained by small budgets and police departments must creatively employ an array of fresh tools, including wiretapping and increased penalties for pimps, recently approved by the state Legislature.

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Federal funds may come from a bipartisan bill in the U.S. Senate, the Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Deterrence and Victims Support Act, which will give grants to law-enforcement agencies and to services that help victims.

We may not know "Lacy" personally but all of us must help her and others in her predicament.