

Group gives Ariz. 'C' grade in effort vs. sex trafficking

by [Jorge Salazar](#) - Mar. 9, 2011 12:00 AM
Cronkite News

Arizona should have a zero-tolerance policy for men who engage in sexual intercourse with underage prostitutes, a former congresswoman said Tuesday.

Linda Smith, founder of the advocacy group Shared Hope International, presented the state with a grade of C for its efforts to protect children from sex trafficking.

"There is an extensive tolerance of female trafficking in Arizona," she said at a news conference held at the state Capitol.

Smith, who represented Washington state in the U.S. House from 1995-98, detailed the Protected Innocence Legislative Framework, an analysis of state laws conducted by her group and the American Center for Law and Justice.

The report graded states on their laws against sex trafficking, penalties for buyers, penalties for traffickers, penalties for facilitators, protection of victims and training of law-enforcement agents.

Smith criticized provisions in state law that reduce the charge in a child-prostitution case from a Class 2 to a Class 6 felony if the girl is between 15 and 17 and the state can't prove the buyer knew her age. That can reduce a sentence to 90 days from as much as 21 years, she said.

"There is no way to prove they know," Smith

said.

Amira Birger, a survivor of child sex trafficking who spoke at the news conference, said it's ridiculous to think most buyers don't know they are paying for a sexual encounter with an underage prostitute.

Birger remembers being placed in lines with other prostitutes while so-called johns picked them up.

"It was always the younger girls being picked," Birger said.

Erin Otis, a prosecutor for the Maricopa County Attorney's Office who specializes in sex crimes, said her office successfully lobbied for removing the ability of pimps to claim they didn't know a prostitute was underage but that lawmakers haven't been willing to remove it for buyers.

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