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Campaign seeks to raise awareness of domestic minor sex trafficking

A national campaign to raise awareness about sex trafficking of American girls was launched Tuesday during a news conference at the Space Needle. Billboards recently went up on the streets below Seattle's most iconic landmark, where girls and women still walk "the track," an area of prostitution bordered by Lenora and Mercer streets, between Fifth Avenue and Westlake.

By Sara Jean Green

Seattle Times staff reporter



The billboard features a girl, hugging her knees on a bed. She sits on a blue bedspread covered with cartoon animals.

The caption reads, "TRAFFICKED AND TORTURED NIGHTLY"

The billboard, at the corner of Denny Way and Taylor Avenue, is part of a national campaign to raise awareness about what's come to be known as domestic minor sex trafficking.

The campaign, called "Do you know Lacy?" is being spearheaded by Shared Hope International, an anti-trafficking organization based in Vancouver, Wash., that was founded by former U.S. Rep. Linda Smith in 1998. Lacy, a pseudonym

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Smith gave to one young victim in her book, "Renting Lacy," is now an every girl of sorts, representing every American girl lured into the sex trade.

A news conference to announce the campaign and release a 60-page assessment on how well Washington state is investigating and prosecuting pimps and customers, providing long-term services to sexually exploited girls and training police and social-service providers to recognize the signs of prostitution was held Tuesday at the Space Needle.

Washington is a national leader "in the arrest and investigation of those who buy and sell our kids," Smith said. She singled out King and Clark counties as being especially aggressive in going after pimps and customers, and credited the Seattle Police Department for investigations that have led to several convictions of pimps, including one man who in March was sentenced to 26 ½ years in prison for pimping out a 15-year-old Auburn girl.

Shared Hope is also sponsoring a daylong training session on Friday for law-enforcement officers, social-service providers, youth advocates and members of the public at Overlake Church in Redmond. The hope is that each person who attends the training will in turn train his or her colleagues and friends on how to identify girls involved in prostitution, Smith said.

The location of the news conference was deliberately chosen: In the shadow of Seattle's most iconic landmark, girls and women still walk "the track" that last year was the focus of a six-month Seattle police sting operation known as "Operation Fast Track." Thirty men were arrested, including Jerry Lewis Smith, 47, who is now standing trial in King County Superior Court, accused of attempted promoting the commercial sex abuse of a minor.

Last June, a Seattle Times reporter and photographer accompanied a team of police officers who arrested Smith (no relation to Linda Smith) when he allegedly arranged to pick up a 17-year-old girl who had agreed to work for him as a prostitute. But the so-called girl was, in fact, a Seattle police officer who had been working as a decoy near Sixth Avenue North and Thomas Street.

According to charging documents filed in Smith's case, the Seattle Center track is known for "a younger and cleaner class of prostitutes" and is referred to on the streets as "The Fashion Show" because "prostitutes dress in a bolder, more revealing manner."

Seattle police Lt. Eric Sano, who attended Tuesday's news conference, said last year's operation "put a huge dent" in prostitution activities along the track, the area bordered by Lenora and Mercer streets, between Fifth Avenue and Westlake. "But I think they're getting smarter," he said of pimps, who are increasingly moving to cities outside Seattle.

Seattle police recovered 81 juveniles last year, but the numbers so far this year are down, apparently because pimps are migrating to the Eastside and to cities such as Kent and Federal Way, Sano said. Still, police arrested seven customers on Aurora Avenue North on Thursday night, and five others were arrested on Rainier Avenue on May 20, he said. No juveniles were found in either sting.

According to Smith, Seattle enjoys a culture of "innovative tenacity," in which the criminal-justice system, social-service providers and others have banded together to fight the sex trafficking of girls. Still, she said, "most people ... don't know much (about it) and there lies a lot of our problem."

An estimated 100,000 girls — both U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents — are lured or forced into prostitution each year, Smith said.

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