

# Innocence Lost

by Carol Latter

For many, the term **“child trafficking”** conjures up images of the crime-ridden cities of the Third World. But this crime is taking place in our world—and **our children are the victims.**



■ **Along a stretch of suburban highway lined by a haphazard assortment of big box stores, service businesses and dated diners, parents shop for toys and groceries in the waning hours of daylight, seemingly oblivious to its imminent transformation to a more sinister world.**

In the parking lot of an oversized retail outlet, Raymond Bechard and a female intervention specialist pull up next to a van with tinted windows that will become, for the next few hours, the mobile vantage point for two reporters seeking a glimpse into the world of child trafficking. The setting: not the sleazy, have-not neighborhoods of a major city like New York or Chicago, but **Greater Hartford's Berlin Turnpike.**

Over the next few hours, along a road illuminated by streetlamps, neon signs and strings of tired Christmas lights, the van will navigate the maze of cheap motels and strip clubs where child traffickers ply their trade, selling the services of their female victims.

Mr. Bechard is the founder and president of Ahava Kids, a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization that has adopted as its mission the rescue and care of girls as young as 13 from a life of sexual enslavement, brutality and abuse. His efforts have taken him across the country and around the world.

Closer to home, he and his colleagues have spent the past five years observing the underbelly of Connecticut's cities and towns—the hide-in-plain-sight world where disenfranchised young women, once filled with hopes and dreams for the future, are lured with promises of a better life, and then trapped in an existence of degradation and fear.

But Mr. Bechard and his colleagues have done more than observe. They have acted. Working in cooperation with law enforcement agencies around the globe, Ahava Kids has assisted in saving more than 3,000 young women and men—in roughly equal numbers—from child trafficking, forced labor and service as child soldiers.

In the U.S., the organization works closely with local and state police and the FBI, and **has rescued about 50 teens, mostly females, from child trafficking in Connecticut.** Its Rescue, Relocation and Rehabilitation process is aimed at giving these girls the best chance of survival and a decent life.

Tonight, as on countless other nights, Mr. Bechard and his partner Leslie, who asked that her last name not be used, will visit the establishments they've identified as child trafficking hotspots. As Ray waits in the vehicle, Leslie—casually dressed and posing as a potential or former exotic dancer,

perhaps—will strike up a conversation with, or even befriend, one or more of the girls. Sharing a cigarette outside a strip club, or while ordering food in a pizza joint next door, she will work to gain a young girl's trust, with the goal of convincing her that escape from the sex trade, and the beginning of a safe and productive life, could be just moments away.

"What Leslie does is extraordinary," Mr. Bechard said as, across the parking lot, she casually quizzed young girls in skintight mini-skirts, skimpy tops and gaudy platform shoes about their working conditions. "You have to approach these girls when their pimps are not around, and you only have a matter of minutes to make a connection. Not many people can do what Leslie does. It's a gift."

Still, he noted, the process of getting a particular girl out of the business through direct intervention could take anywhere from half an hour to six months or a year, depending on her history, how long she's been involved, and her level of trust.

As Leslie chats with the girls, strip club customers come and go. Some of them are leather-clad, tattooed bikers. Others are clean-cut men in their 40s and 50s who drive expensive cars and look like they could be your lawyer, your dentist—or your neighbor.

Later, outside a seedy, ramshackle motel with a swimming pool filled in with dirt and half-covered by weeds, Mr. Bechard will point out a Mercedes parked almost out of view. The motel, high on a hill and hidden from view by overgrown trees and bushes, is just a couple of hundred of feet from the main strip of the Berlin Turnpike, but serves as a safe haven of sorts for men who propagate the cycle of abuse by serving as these young girls' paying customers.

For the girls, however, there is no safe haven—just an endless nightmare from which there seems to be no escape.

### **The scope of the problem**

Many people believe that child trafficking, whereby children are used for sexual exploitation, forced labor, and illegal activities like begging or selling drugs—only takes place in Third World countries. **The truth is that children under the age of 18 are enslaved in communities across America every day.** Vulnerable teens, many of them runaways or disenfranchised from their families, are recruited in bars, shopping malls, bus stations and online, then forced through a combination of drugs, threats and coercion to sell themselves for the benefit of their captors.

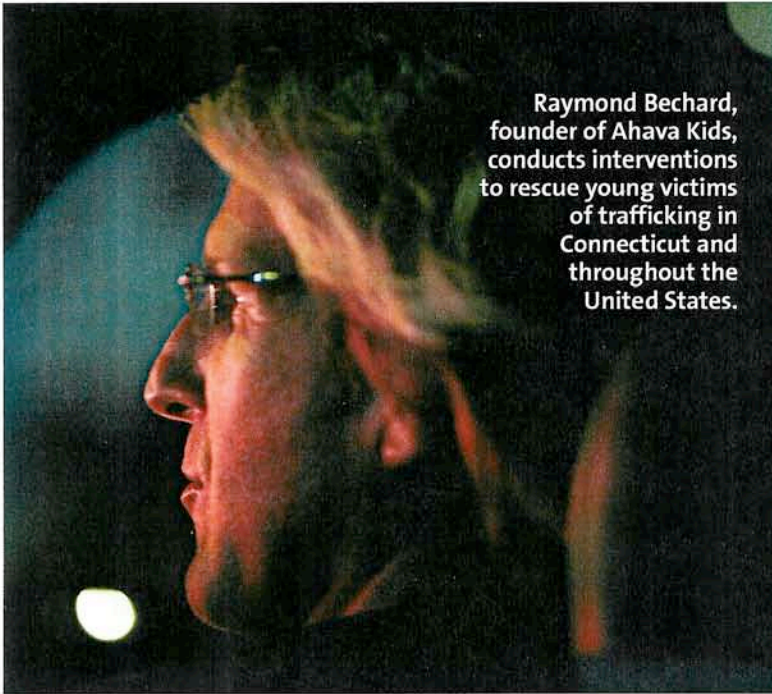
Child trafficking is not only the fastest growing crime in the world, but third largest trans-national crime, after the sales of drugs and guns. UNICEF puts the value of child trafficking at more than \$12 billion a year, and estimates there are more

than 2.4 million child victims.

In the U.S., more than 300,000 children are trafficked each year, according to estimates by the FBI, but Mr. Bechard says that's likely only the tip of the iceberg.

Why are children becoming the most profitable product for criminals? "A drug dealer can sell a little bag of drugs on the street just once. A weapons dealer can sell a little handgun on the street just once," he explained. **"But a trafficker can sell a young woman 10, 15 or 20 times a day—day after day after day."**

There's a huge amount of money to be made, and relatively little risk, since much of this illegal activity goes undetected.



**Raymond Bechard, founder of Ahava Kids, conducts interventions to rescue young victims of trafficking in Connecticut and throughout the United States.**

While a great deal of child trafficking is conducted by organized crime, a lot is also carried out by small-time criminals looking to prey on, and profit from, defenseless young women. "Sometimes, the pimps are not these organized guys," Mr. Bechard said. "They're the girls' classmates in some cases, or their brother." Trafficking, he said, "is about money and drugs. The sex is the way to get both."

But it makes little difference who the perpetrator is. Mr. Bechard and Leslie know all too well that once these girls are trapped in a nightmare of child trafficking, there are usually only two ways out: rescue or death. They recounted a conversation with one victim they spoke to, a woman in her mid-30s who had been trapped in the trade for years, through a combination of intimidation and drug

dependence. She told them that she had once been raped, stabbed and nearly killed under a bridge by a "customer" who didn't want to pay. She managed to get away, but said she was glad it had been her—and not a teenager who would have had no idea what to do, and little chance of escaping alive. All too often, in towns and cities across the country, these girls are not so lucky, and end up dead.

**The primary goal of Ahava Kids is to get trafficked children off the streets and back into a safe environment**—by providing a secure place for them to stay, "rescue kits" containing necessities like clothing and toiletries, and the assistance they need to get their lives back on track. A near-term objective for the organization is to establish a safe house to serve victims from New York City to Boston.

As with anything else, the challenge lies in raising the funds needed to transform this dream into a reality. Doing so, Mr. Bechard said, "is critical to establishing the safe house, which will lead to saving young lives across southern New England. With only 45 residential treatment beds in the United States for children abused by commercial sexual exploitation, the need for such a facility is urgent."

The nonprofit has been pursuing donations from corporations and private individuals, and just received a \$10,000 grant provided by Hoffman Auto Group owners and well-known local philanthropists Bradley and Jeffrey Hoffman, through the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

Mr. Bechard said obtaining the remainder of the funds needed to set up the safe house would be "a dream"—not only for the Ahava Kids organization, but for the Connecticut teens who, every day, find themselves in imminent jeopardy.

### **The scenes of the crimes**

Child trafficking is prevalent in a number of Connecticut's larger urban areas. The south end of Hartford, where Mr. Bechard and Leslie also conduct rescue missions, might seem on the surface to be a more likely hotspot than its suburban neighbors for this type of activity. So why is the Berlin Turnpike a major trafficking location? Leslie noted that along an approximately 11-mile stretch of the turnpike that leads to the Hartford city line, there are some 37 motels.

"There are also parking lots and wooded areas," she said. "You can take a john anywhere." She added, "We just drove past an 18-wheeler. It would be very normal for the driver of a parked 18-wheeler to have a girl inside."

The strip is also home to tattoo parlors, topless and nude bars and clubs featuring exotic dancers. A dancer at one strip club told Leslie that in order to get a job, **a girl simply has to provide a Polaroid of herself in the nude, and another of herself in a bathing suit. No proof of age is required.** She

added: "One girl working here is 15."

On this particular night, with two reporters in the back seat of the van, Mr. Bechard pulled into a strip club's parking lot and parked. Leslie got out on the far side of the vehicle, made her way to the club's entrance and went in, on the pretext of having to use the bathroom.

After making small talk with a couple of girls, she came back outside and stopped to talk with several dancers, one of whom she'd met and spoken with on several occasions. Then Leslie bummed a cigarette—the perfect excuse to linger.

As they stood there, smoking, the girls told her that the money for dancing was good, and that she should consider getting back into it. The conversa-

tion ran some 15 or 20 minutes before Leslie decided that staying any longer might arouse suspicion, and returned to the van. Visits to other hotspots would follow.

Asked what she says to girls who are trapped in the world of child trafficking, Leslie explained that she tries to befriend them, and let them know there is a safe way out. Above all, Leslie noted, she treats them with compassion, understanding and respect. "I treat them the way I'd want to be treated," she said.

There would be no rescues that night, but the groundwork had been laid for another encounter with these girls—one that would, with any luck, have a more productive ending.

## Her nightmare was a reality

by Lynn Woike

■ **Carla, 20, an energetic, engaging, slim woman with flashing blue eyes, first ran away at 15 and worked on the streets for about three years. It took 22 months of continuous work by Ahava Kids to get her started in a new life. Now she's working full time and sharing a home with roommates.**

**She talked to *Hartford Magazine* about her experiences on the street.**

**These are her words.**

The Berlin Turnpike is horrible. It's disgusting. Hooker Boulevard—that's what the Berlin Turnpike is. Hooker Boulevard or Whores R Us.

There's a lot of hotels. The one I stayed in was more like an apartment hotel. It's very scary. People just driving by would never expect it. Like you go to a party and you see there's an after-party. That after-party is 24/7 in these places. But it's not a party. It's constant sorrow and fear.

The women on the Berlin Turnpike are living in these little trashy hotels, getting paid \$40 an hour

for a guy to violate them. It's horrible. The women that are in there are doing it to survive. They're pushed into these things. They're lured into these things. They're blackmailed into these things. They're beaten into these things. If they use drugs, they'll do anything to get what they need. They don't realize that they have other opportunities.

**People don't believe that it could happen to anybody. People think, "Oh, it would never happen to me." Yeah, right. That's what I thought.**

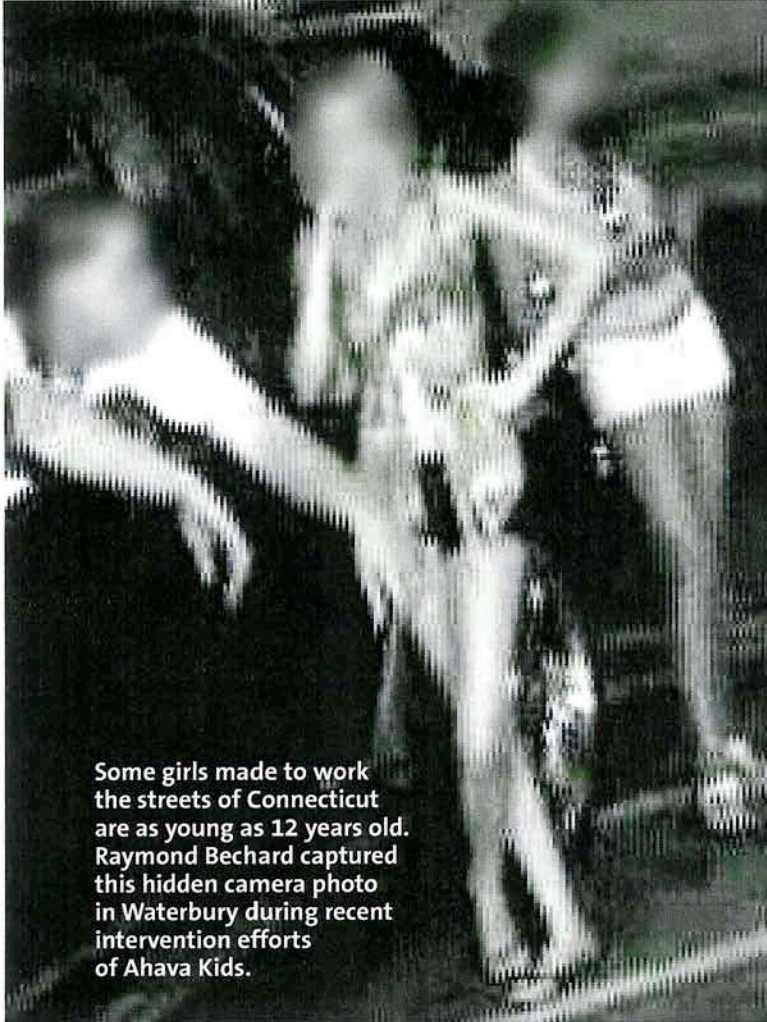
I had so many opportunities and I just didn't care. I just wanted to be with my parents but it didn't happen that way, so I went into a rebellious mode. Fifteen to 18 was nonstop running away [from foster care and group homes]. It started off where I'd go to Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury. Those are the areas you can get what you want, what you need, just by the way you look. There's always people there that are always willing to befriend you, take you somewhere. So I'd travel with them to New York.

Because I'm young and I'm pretty, men would be throwing things at me. Clothes and jewelry and food, places to stay. After a while, it wasn't just given to me anymore. There were strings attached.

In New York City, I started getting into dancing [which also included sexual favors]. It wasn't like

I was forced into it. It was more that I was manipulated, coerced. Usually that's how it started. It would be my boyfriend or my lover. And it would be, "We need money. We need this. We need that." It was more him bringing me to the strip club or him bringing me anywhere to do the things I needed to do. He'd guilt trip me into it.

I would make the excuse for him, feel sorry for him and I'd do what he wanted to make him happy.



Some girls made to work the streets of Connecticut are as young as 12 years old. Raymond Bechard captured this hidden camera photo in Waterbury during recent intervention efforts of Ahava Kids.

Photo courtesy of Ahava Kids

I'd do anything he asked me to because I felt like I cared about him—go to the strip clubs, be a call girl. [Back in Connecticut,] I ended up working at the strip club seven nights a week from open to close. I would keep some of my money and I would give some of my money to him for housing me and feeding me. Then my expenses got more and I had to give up more of my money. It got harder. A lot harder.

I'm the kind of person who wants to take care of the people I care about. I make excuses for them.

My boyfriend wouldn't work. I'd be supporting the both of us. My money would go straight to him so he could pay the bills or so that he could do this or that. That was my weakness. It was, "You don't have to work. I'll take care of you." He took advantage of that weakness of mine and that's what they do.

**Any woman, I don't care if she's stripping or whoring or whatever, the man that's making her do it is doing it because he knows her weakness and he's using it to his advantage.**

No woman wants to do that. When you're doing it, it's because you're pushed into it or you're forced into it. You feel like you're degrading yourself. You think, "When I was little, this is not what I wanted to do." But you don't say that to anybody.

When I was in that situation, it was very hard to get out. Once you mess up, you feel like there's no going back because no one will love you. It was because I didn't get the love that I needed when I was little that I'd go looking for it in the wrong places. I wanted love so bad, I was willing to go anywhere to find it.

I was always in areas that I shouldn't have been. People around me were using coke, crack, heroin, dope, pills, liquor, everything. I'd drink because it got me out of reality and made the pain hurt less.

You might not get this, but when you were there, you didn't want to be there. But when you weren't there, you felt like you needed to get back in because when you're in that situation, you have the food you need, the fancy clothes, the jewelry, the nice cars. But you also have the bad things like the abuse, or the people using you to get what they want, always taking advantage of you. It's confusing. It feels like it's the only way you can survive.

In that world, I could be anybody I wanted to be. Nobody knew about my past, all my foster homes and my parents. I could make myself into what I wanted to be, and what they wanted me to be, which would make them like me even more, which would make their friends like me, which would make me a "loved person."

I lived moment by moment. I was lucky. I had it a lot easier than some. I didn't have to worry about, "Oh God, am I going to die tomorrow if I don't do what he tells me?"

**There's women out there right now with a gun to their head and a man is saying, "If you don't do this, you're going to die."**

Some of the things I've seen—evil things—would terrify you, haunt you, give you nightmares. Like guns to people's heads. I've seen unbelievable amounts of drugs, unbelievable amounts of money. People getting shot. Women getting punched in the face or beaten with belts. All those things I've seen and I couldn't do anything about it but sit right there and act like it didn't happen.

And people look at these women like they're garbage, like they're whores. Listen, you don't

know their background. Some of those girls working at the strip clubs don't even want to be stripping. They're pushed into it. You don't know if their father could have pushed them into it. Or they didn't have a father. There's no excuses, but there's reasons.

The customers? The men who come to these calls are very insecure. Some have got money. They want to show it off. They wanna be big rollers. They want to be gangsters. You get real creepy men. You get men who are probably abused by their own women.

Then you get the really nice guys, like five out of 50, who are actually really nice... who want company. They work all the time, they've got bills, family. They want someone to sit down and listen to them. If you have eye contact and you actually listen to what they say and you respond to them, they fall in love. Seriously.

They'll give you \$400 for the hour and they'll spend \$800 on you during that hour. You treat him nice, he's going to come back.

We're your dream. We're your Barbie doll. We do what you like. And if we do it the exact way you like it, you're going to come back, no matter how much it costs. But it's a fantasy.

**These girls approaching 15 years old who are running away need to know things can hurt you and there's nothing you can do about it. It's going to happen.** I've seen little girls walking down the street. Some guy pulls up. Because he looks cute, she gets in the car. Girl, if you were my daughter, I would slap the shit out of you. Getting in a car with a stranger, and then driving away, is

giving him the OK to hurt you, to do anything they want to you. They'll promise you anything, then make you pay them back.

When I was that age, I had alternatives, but I always blew them away. I went into DCF when I was 9. As I got older, I had opportunities open to me and I wouldn't take them; I would up and leave. I let myself down in some ways because I wouldn't open my eyes.

I'm no longer making excuses. That was one of my hardest things to get over. I'm still working on it.

Now I'm so happy. I don't have much now, I really don't, but I've never been happier. I've done everything for me, not for anyone else. I had to do a lot of hard work myself, but I've had help. Leslie (*an intervention specialist at Ahava Kids*) stuck by me. She's the only one who never judged me. She didn't give up on me. She'd come looking for me when I disappeared. I'm used to people leaving and not following through.

Girls [working on the Berlin Turnpike] say, "I can't do a 9-to-5 job." But you don't have to work 9 to 5. You could work the same hours you work at the strip club and do half the work. I mean, it's not as much money, but you feel proud of yourself when you come home with that paycheck at the end of the week. It could be a little bullshit \$300, but that feels good. You feel better about yourself. You feel stronger, and nobody can take you down.

I'm getting on my own two feet. I've never been happier. I have a loving family, a loving boyfriend. Everything I could be thankful for, and more. And I'm not afraid anymore.

## Laying down the law

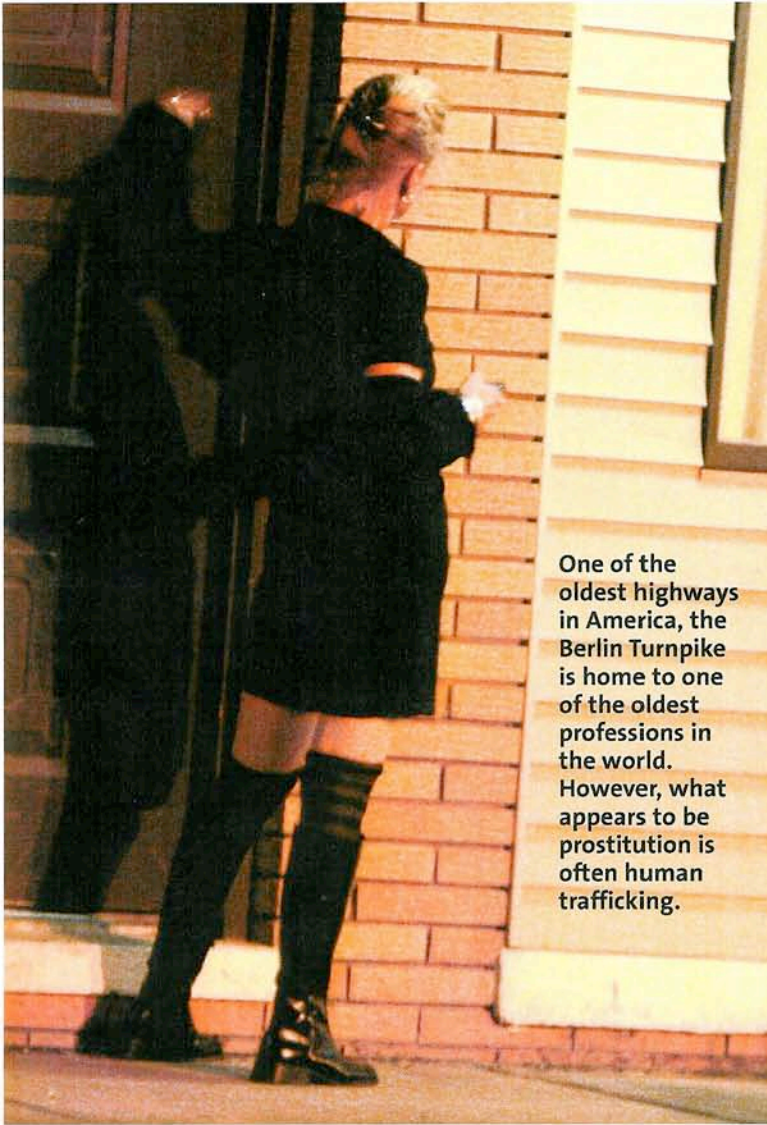
by Mark Jahne

■ **In April, Brian Forbes was sentenced in U.S. District Court in Hartford to 13 years in prison. He was convicted of holding two 18-year-old women prisoners in an East Hartford apartment for eight weeks in 2003 and forcing them to engage in multiple sex acts with as many as seven men each day.**

He is one of several men arrested and tried by the feds for forcing young women into prostitution and taking matters beyond the "pimp" status common on the street. According to testimony in the trial, the women were heroin addicts who were lured into working for Forbes. He controlled access to the addictive drug to get them to do his bidding and also used physical violence, such as choking.

That brought to more than 10 the number of men convicted on federal human trafficking charges in Connecticut in recent years.

Kevin O'Connor, a West Hartford resident who is now the third-ranking official in the U.S. Department of Justice, was the U.S. Attorney for Connecticut when an increased emphasis was placed upon stemming the tide of human sex trafficking here. **"It is trafficking," he said, when people "coerce you into forced labor or prostitution."** In the



One of the oldest highways in America, the Berlin Turnpike is home to one of the oldest professions in the world. However, what appears to be prostitution is often human trafficking.

cases along the Berlin Turnpike and elsewhere in Connecticut, "you have young girls who are essentially psychologically or physically coerced" into performing sex acts with strangers.

The incidents must involve crossing state lines for them to fall under federal trafficking statutes, which generally carry longer prison sentences. When the activity is concentrated within state

lines—for example, a trafficker recruits a girl in Hartford to work the turnpike—several state laws can be applied to the crime. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies are working together to protect and rescue the victims. "It's a priority from the national level," said Mr. O'Connor, who was part of a successful effort to establish a Connecticut trafficking task force in 2004. In his current position, he oversees all expenditures for such task forces throughout the country.

Wethersfield Police Chief James Cetran readily admits there is a problem with prostitution in the motels that stretch along the Berlin Turnpike through Wethersfield, Newington and Berlin. "The motels have always been a source of crime problems," said the veteran law enforcement officer, who rose through the ranks at WPD. "We've had drugs, prostitution, even some homicides up at the motels." Other crimes, like assaults and robberies, are also common.

**But fighting the problem is a challenge that requires a lot of police resources and rarely yields much of a return.** Chief Cetran pointed out that both prostitution and soliciting the services of a prostitute are misdemeanors, not felonies, under state law.

Even when police make an arrest of an alleged hooker, john or pimp, the case is often reduced through plea bargaining in court, which is another reason why most chiefs would rather focus their resources elsewhere. The best way for police to fight prostitution or sex trafficking is to set up stings, but these "take a lot of manpower, a lot of resources," he said. And all too often, the end result is plea bargaining and limited punishment for all involved.

**Promoting prostitution is a felony, and purchasing sex from a girl under the age of 16—even if she claims that she agreed to the act—is statutory rape, also a felony.** Those crimes get more attention from local police, but even this becomes problematic. Many johns arrested for having sex with underage girls claim the girls lied about their age and made themselves look older.

Ahava argues that victims of human sex trafficking are not prostitutes—they are people forced or coerced into selling their bodies by their handlers, and to suggest that they are prostitutes only victimizes them further.

Asked about Ahava's attempts to be part of the solution, Chief Cetran said he is aware of the organization's presence in town, and while its members have not shared any plans or activities with local police, his attitude is "more power to them," as long as the group doesn't break any laws in conducting its interventions.

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