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‘John school’ law aimed at sex trafficking takes effect Jan. 1

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People caught paying for sex in North Dakota already face the threat of jail time. Starting next week, they could end up in the classroom as well.

Under a “john school” law that takes effect Friday, judges can sentence those convicted of hiring someone for sex to attend an offender education program to learn about the harmful effects of the commercial sex industry.

It was among a raft of bills passed by state lawmakers last spring aimed at curbing sex trafficking in North Dakota, where an oil boom has attracted pimps hoping to cash in on a thriving economy full of male workers flush with disposable income.

“It is to attack the demand side of the equation when it comes to human trafficking,” said Sen. Mac Schneider, D-Grand Forks, who introduced the bipartisan bill. “It’s a hard thing to fess up to, but if there was no demand for the illicit services offered by sex traffickers in North Dakota, there would be no sex trafficking here.”

The education program was part of a broader bill signed into law April 23 that also stiffened the penalty for hiring someone to engage in sexual activity. On Aug. 1, the penalty for a second or subsequent offense within 10 years was increased from a Class B misdemeanor punishable by 30 days in jail and a \$1,500 fine to a Class A misdemeanor punishable by one year in jail and a \$3,000 fine.

The john school piece was delayed until Jan. 1 to allow time to develop the curriculum, which will teach about the negative consequences of the commercial sex industry, including the health and legal consequences and impacts on communities, survivors, spouse and children.

Christina Sambor, coordinator of a Force to End Human Sexual Exploitation, a statewide coalition against human trafficking, said both FUSE and the attorney general’s Human Trafficking Commission are in the beginning stages of creating the john school curriculum and will determine the administration and cost of the program in the coming months. Judges may order offenders to pay the cost.

Until North Dakota’s john school is ready to launch, the state will use online options or some offerings through nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities, she said.

The concept for North Dakota's john school came from the Offenders Prostitution Program run by the St. Paul, Minn.-based nonprofit group Breaking Free, which supports women leaving prostitution.

Terry Forliti, a survivor of sex trafficking who works as systems analyst for Breaking Free, welcomed the North Dakota john school law.

"It's very, very encouraging," she said, adding, "North Dakota has been a huge funnel for sex trafficking for years."

Breaking Free's program is an eight-hour, \$750 seminar led by law enforcement, health and community experts and survivors of prostitution. Tests are given before and after the program to measure information retention and attitude change, Forliti said.

"It's a restorative justice program designed to hold the offender accountable by raising awareness and providing resources," she said.

Those who go through the program have only a 2 percent re-offense rate in Minnesota, Forliti said. The group doesn't track whether they reoffend in other states.

Of the 465 participants since January 2013, 70 percent had children, 57 percent were married and 81 percent had no prior criminal record, she said.

"So these are not guys who are sociopaths running around committing a lot of crimes," she said.

Breaking Free started the program in 2001, and its history suggests North Dakota's program may take a while to develop.

"The program we have today, it took a good eight, nine years to work out the details here and there," Forliti said.

(Reach Nowatzki at 701-255-5607 or by email at mnowatzki@forumcomm.com.)

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