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U.S. senator: Cultural change needed to stop human trafficking

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Associated Press

Published: August 27, 2015 - 03:28 PM

COLUMBUS, Ohio: While laws are changing to reflect the reality that child prostitutes are victims, cultural attitudes also need to change, U.S. Sen. Rob Portman said Thursday after hearing from experts and a survivor of child trafficking.

Portman said most of his constituents tell him, “‘Are you sure this is going on in Ohio?’ They can’t believe that in our own backyard there’d be this problem today.”

Portman, a Republican who serves as co-chair of the Senate Caucus to End Human Trafficking, heard from community leaders working on the problem during a tour and forum at the Central Ohio Youth for Christ City Life Center in Columbus.

The center also operates the Gracehaven program, founded in 2008 to help rehabilitate victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. Gracehaven just opened a center for up to eight girls in Ohio and already has two girls, said Director Terri Foltz.

“It’s hard to overemphasize the amount of services they need, the trauma they’ve endured,” Foltz said.

She said people often focus on the physical abuse the girls have suffered. But just as harmful is the emotional damage the girls undergo by placing themselves in bondage to their trafficker, Foltz said.

During the forum, a 24-year-old survivor of trafficking told of living a double life from age 15 to 21, putting on a normal face to classmates and teachers while being trafficked at night by a friend of her father’s. The woman is now married and just had her first child. She said people can’t assume anything about the background of victims, who come from rich and poor homes.

The state estimates about 1,000 Ohio children are forced into the sex trade each year. Between July 2013 and April 2015, 135 cases of children and young adult victims of trafficking were identified, according to a state report released in July. Most were girls between ages 13 and 18; 20 were under age 13.

Portman has sponsored several bills to battle human trafficking, including a law signed in May that strengthens the ability of police to investigate and prosecute those who buy of sex from trafficking victims.