

Fits and Starts: Two School-based Approaches to Prevent Sex Trafficking

February 18, 2015

By Brittany Patterson

On a late winter evening about three years ago, Barbara Hernandez stood in front of half a dozen members of the Riley Elementary School Parent Teacher Association in Long Beach, Calif.

Surrounded by illustrated books, her fellow parents were seated in tiny chairs, their knees nearly hitting their chests, and Hernandez remembers their facial expressions shifting from curiosity to shock and, finally, to determination, as she spoke.



Keynote speaker Nicole Clark at the Youth Exploitation Safety Symposium in Long Beach, Calif. Photo credit: Crittenton Services for Children and Families

It was a short presentation, only about 20 minutes, but the message was an important one: What could parents do to recognize and prevent domestic minor sex trafficking?

“They were so open, embraced the information,” she said. “At the same time they were appalled it was happening in Long Beach.”

Within the U.S., California is home to three of the FBI’s 13 “High Intensity Child Prostitution” areas: San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. It is hard to pin down a number, but experts estimate more than 100,000 children in the U.S. are impacted by child sexual exploitation, which includes sex trafficking, child pornography and child sex tourism.

Education is one key to preventing the sexual exploitation of minors – that was one of the recommendations handed down by the [California Child Welfare Council in June 2013](#).

With varying degrees of success, two cities in California – Long Beach and Oakland – have leveraged local school districts to bring the commercial sexual exploitation of children, or CSEC, to the attention of the very students who could find themselves most vulnerable.

The adage ‘it’s easier said than done’ certainly applies in this case. It is not as simple as teaching parents and students about the commercial sexual exploitation of minors. Curriculum is scarce, and perhaps more problematic is the understandable reluctance of administrators to acknowledge the need to present information about this traumatic crime.

More than two years after the Child Welfare recommendations were released, Oakland Unified School District is still struggling to implement a trafficking prevention program to more than 2,500 seventh grade girls, despite widespread praise for the program and a recently renewed contract.

Despite promise, program stalls in Oakland

It is estimated that [100 children are sold for sex in Oakland](#) each night, according to West Coast Children’s Clinic, a leading provider of mental health services to children and youth who have spent time on International Boulevard, which has been notoriously dubbed “the track.”

In May 2012, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors allocated \$60,000 to Love Never Fails, a non-profit dedicated to the prevention, rehabilitation and education of youth involved in human trafficking. [A small part of that grant money](#) was allocated for the implementation of an education program the group created called Love Never Hurts.

The program meets the California Department of Education public health standards for middle and high school. [Oakland Unified School District announced](#) they would begin teaching all seventh-graders the Love Never Hurts program. Students would experience a classroom presentation or assembly focused on healthy relationships as well as exploitation.

Those who are at greater risk for exploitation would be eligible for a six- to eight-week group program with individual mentoring.

The Dublin, California-based organization has educated more than 3,000 Bay Area students through Love Never Hurts. After a successful implementation at one middle school in Oakland, the group was asked to speak to the Oakland City Council. From there, Bonita Hopkins, education director for Love Never Fails, said they began training staff at OUSD.

“It was supposed to happen last school year [2013-2014],” Hopkins said. “This past summer [2014] we pushed them, but we’re still waiting.”

Barbara McClung, director of Behavioral Health Initiatives for the school district, told [The San Francisco Chronicle](#) the program would cost \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year to bring to all of the district’s middle schools, money that they do not have.

In an email response to *The Chronicle of Social Change*, McClung said: “I regret that we do not have significant progress to report yet. We are still recruiting schools and working out implementation timelines. Delivering the program remains a priority but we are still in the early stages of preparation.”

Meanwhile, Hopkins said Love Never Fails has been running the program without OUSD staff. Last fall they worked with ninth grade girls through an after-school program at Oakland High School.

“It’s very important to get education out there to students and parents,” she said “This population is real and very prevalent in the Bay Area. Prevention is the key.”

Grassroots effort bears fruit in Long Beach

It was 2011 when Barbara Hernandez approached the principal of her daughter’s school and pitched the idea of providing some sort of education program for sixth grade girls on healthy relationships. The idea was that if young girls knew what a healthy relationship looked like, they would be less likely to fall into a relationship that could lead to sex trafficking.



Long Beach school board members and Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe at YESS 2015. Photo credit: Crittenton Services for Children and Families

Often, pimps, or exploiters as they are also called, begin a relationship through romantic overtures. These “[Romeo pimps](#)” often give their “girlfriends” gifts and money, which is followed by isolation from friends and family as well as other control tactics like physical and emotional abuse. [For a host of reasons](#), many survivors of sex trafficking report they did not even realize it was happening, or if they did they did not have the resources to escape. Often, witnesses report, they have endured trauma that has impacted their self-esteem, which makes them more likely to accept such a patently unhealthy relationship.

“More than 90 percent of the time survivors have experienced a level of trauma, often multiple traumatic experiences,” Hernandez said. “This really impacts the brain development, especially as a youth.”

Hernandez would know. She is the vice president of Community Based Services at Crittenton Services for Children and Families, a non-profit social services agency that works with commercially sexually exploited children. She has worked with minors in the child welfare system for more than 15 years.

According to a report published by the state's Child Welfare Council in 2012, it is estimated that between 50 and 80 percent of trafficked girls were in foster care. Most commercially sexually exploited children have a history of abuse and trauma prior to being victimized.

When Hernandez didn't get any traction with her daughter's principal, she decided to take her offer to the PTA.

"They were way more open and wanted training," she said.

Word spread and Hernandez began spending her evenings in school gyms all over Long Beach presenting what she calls "CSEC 101," which includes information on the subculture, language and data. She also has an extended version of the presentation that includes how the brain is impacted by trauma.

Last year, word got back to the Long Beach Unified School District School Board, which then asked for the training. Last month, a Youth Exploitation Safety Symposium, which was spawned in part from both the district's and parents' desire for more information, was attended by nearly 400 community members.

Hernandez said the superintendent of schools "gave us everything we asked for and more" for the event. The Long Beach Human Trafficking Task Force, Long Beach Unified School District and Long Beach PTA partnered to bring more than 80 organizations, workshops and speakers together with the goal to educate parents, students and teachers on human sex trafficking, safety and empowerment.

"We work daily with law enforcement and many community partners to keep our students and schools safe," said LBUSD Superintendent Christopher Steinhauser [in a press release](#). "As an extension of that work, we're partnering with the city's task force on this symposium, which will provide important information for students and parents. Our aim is to help prevent human trafficking through dialogue, education and increased awareness."

That is not to say there have not been challenges. Hernandez said when she does the training she sometimes hears parents say things such as "it doesn't happen here," or "my kid doesn't run around with those type of people."

"When they get through with the training it opens their eyes," she said.



Crittendon staff and Long Beach Trafficking Task Force at the January symposium. Photo credit: Crittenton Services for Children and Families

For example, one statistic that she says often shocks parents is the average age of entry into sexual exploitation: Between the ages of 12-14.

[Increased reports](#) of violence associated with sex trafficking over the last few years might have sparked more openness from parents on the subject.

“Maybe our community is ready,” she said. “I also think a lot of people thought it had to be a gruesome talk, but the takeaway from the trainings is what makes for a healthy relationship, what are boundaries and what are the effects of trauma.”

Prevention, Hernandez adds, is the key to not losing girls to exploitation.

“Once a girl is in it, it’s a lot harder to get out,” she said.

***Brittany Patterson** is a freelance writer based in Washington D.C. She was a part of the Journalism for Social Change Program while earning her Master’s Degree at U.C. Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism.*