

TN trying to combat human trafficking

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NASHVILLE, TN (WSMV) -

No young child ever dreams of selling themselves, but prostitution and human trafficking are thriving industries in Tennessee.

Leaders and advocates are chipping away at a problem that knows no bounds.

At age 14, Shelia Simpkins ran away from home and into the arms of a so-called boyfriend and pimp.

"When we run away from home, we're running from something, OK, which normally is sexual abuse," said Simpkins.

By age 20, Simpkins worked for a different man.

Simpkins said he drove her and a group of girls across the country to work. One of the stops was Nashville.

"You start selling your body," said Simpkins. "You start getting all these good things like nice purse and nice clothes that goes along with it. You've already been conditioned to think it's OK."

Murfreesboro Pike was one of the roads Simpkins worked under the watchful eye of her pimp. She was forced to work her shift, and if she didn't turn a profit, she faced the wrath of her pimp.

"I had to make \$1,000 a day or I would get my head busted," said Simpkins. "I literally have a road map in my head."

Now Simpkins works at End Slavery Tennessee, one of the groups that backs a new sex trafficking poster going up in Tennessee welcome centers and rest stops.

"This is a transportation-based industry," said Derri Smith, founder of End Slavery Tennessee. "We work, for example, with a couple of girls from Atlanta, and the traffickers said to them 'I'm going to bring you to Nashville because I'll make more money off you there.'

"If somebody sees suspicious signs and they make a call, they might just save a life."

Simpkins agrees. She said a call like that has saved her from years of pain on the streets and behind bars.

"Not only for the girls, but for anyone that goes and uses that bathroom, then sees something that alarms them could also use that number," said Simpkins.

In recent years, Tennessee lawmakers voted to strengthen human sex trafficking laws.

Advocates said law enforcement is focusing on the pimps and customers, but there's still a lot of work to do across the state.

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