

Program Offers Prostitutes Jail or New Life

When you think of Dallas, the Cowboys, Southfork ranch and big, shiny things paid for with oil money are what usually come to mind.

But a closer look reveals something much darker. Easy access to highways and busy commercial trade make the city a hub for illegal activity.

"We're in the south central part of Dallas," Dallas Police Lt. Mike Coleman said.

"We're very close to one of the major truck stops. There's hotels; there's a lot of traffic. We're next to a major thoroughfare next to I-20, and so you get a lot of transient people that come in and out. It's a fertile ground for prostitutes," he told CBN News.

'Prostitution Diversion Initiative'

The Dallas Police Department took a unique approach to the world's oldest profession by offering prostitutes an opportunity to clean up and get off the streets, in lieu of going to jail.

Coleman is head of the department's Prostitution Diversion Initiative, or PDI. It's a partnership between Dallas police, Social Services and other organizations.

The department started the program five years ago mainly out of frustration over arresting the same women over and over again.

"It allows us to move the prostitutes from the wheel of going around in the criminal justice system on a regular basis to moving into a recovery mode," Coleman explained. "(We)

realized we were not going to arrest our way out of this.”

A key part of the program is that police treat the women they arrest as victims, not criminals.

“When you treat them as a victim, that’s what allows them to get the services that they need for whatever is ailing them, be it drug addiction, be it whatever counseling needs they have, for whatever it is that’s causing them to be engaged in this lifestyle,” Coleman explained.

An Ultimatum

One night a month police set up a mobile command center near a local truck stop where hookers find their clients. Officers make arrests for prostitution and other crimes.

The women are given a choice: jail or a chance at a new life via the PDI 45-day program.

Only those who are charged with a misdemeanor can participate in the program. If they accept the offer, the services range from job counseling to mental health services to drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

Renee Breazeale, a community liaison for PDI, said many of the prostitutes she sees suffer years of pain before turning to the streets.

“Eighty to 85 percent of them will acknowledge and are able to articulate childhood victimization, sexual abuse, physical abuse, exploitation, deprivation,” she said.

Sex-Trafficking Victims

The program also sees women who are victims of sex trafficking.

“We have had several women that have been transported literally across the nation—truck stop to truck stop,” Breazeale said. “We’ve had several women that have been kidnapped, forced into sexual slavery.”

“Unfortunately, the ones that are controlled by maybe a pimp or they may be controlled by an individual, those are the ones that we would like to have through the program. Those are the ones we’d like to get away from that environment,” Coleman explained.

Since the launch of PDI five years ago, police have arrested more than 700 prostitutes. While almost half of the women choose the program, not all of them complete it.

Jammie Wolfe once worked the streets of Dallas. She now works as a drug rehab volunteer with PDI. She shared her story while trying to convince other women to give the program a try.

“I think that this program offers a place that women have never had before,” she told CBN News.

“It offers a place of safety. It offers a place of non-judgment. It offers a place to come when you’re done,” she said. “Even if you’re just done for the night, you know you can come here.”

Prostitute: God Changed Me

Karen Green was a prostitute and drug addict for 15 years. She said finding God changed her life. She now serves as a volunteer once a month with PDI and prays other women will find freedom, too.

“When I come out here, I just walk the grounds and I claim it for Jesus and every woman that comes through the PDI,” Green said.

“I pray over her and ask the Lord to give her just the strength to say yes, that she wants help,” she said.

Police said saying yes to the help PDI offers is the starting point on the road to a new life for the women. Once they complete the program, volunteers help them find a job, a home, or reconnect with family.

That is something that benefits the women, police and the entire community.