**PROSTITUTION: A Violent Reality of Homelessness**

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**FACTS:**

- 84 percent of those prostituted report current or past homelessness
- 50,000 people are prostituted in the city of Chicago at any given time, almost all of whom are homeless.
- 95-99 percent of those prostituted have chemical dependency issues
- 66 percent of those prostituted suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder
- 14 is the average age of entry into prostitution
- 90 percent of those prostituted are survivors of sexual violence such as incest and sexual assault

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**“I was homeless for six years. . . . It was rough plenty of nights where I didn’t have anything to eat. I had places to stay, but they were never my own.”**

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**Prostitution: Facts and Realities**

Increasingly in Chicago, advocates and service providers are becoming aware of the connection between homelessness and prostitution. At any given time, approximately 50,000 people are prostituted in the city of Chicago, almost all of whom are homeless. Often, the women and youth involved in prostitution seek shelter in abandoned buildings or abusive homes of partners, pimps or customers and do not have a safe, affordable place of their own. Access to safe and affordable housing can be a viable form of escape and a first step on a road to recovery. Furthermore, safe housing for youth and women at risk can reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.

In a recent Chicago Tribune article entitled, “Sex Slavery Called a Replacement of Drug Trafficking,” the author stated, “With as many as 2 million women worldwide forced into sexual slavery, the sex trade seems to have replaced narcotics as the favored illegal trade activity.”

Prostitution, a commercial transaction in which the body of a woman or youth is the commodity, is a $14 billion a year industry in the United States, with an estimated 1.5 million customers a week.

Forms of prostitution include stripping, escort services, massage parlors, sex tours, trafficking, pornography and survival sex. At least 90 percent of prostitution is pimp controlled or run by organized crime, whose members utilize violence as a form of social control of the women and youth. Many prostituted women and youth experience multiple rapes and violence by customers, pimps and straw-

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The exploitation and violence inherent in prostitution often results in severe physical, emotional and psychological trauma with long-term effects. At least 66 percent of prostituted women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); by comparison, only 20-30 percent of Vietnam War veterans suffer from PTSD. Subsequently prolonged exposure to abuse and violence, common in prostitution, is a significant barrier to escape. Many women and youth have various physical and mental health needs and also require treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

**Chemical Dependency**

A survivor who worked at an escort service for five years states, “I only had two dates that weren’t physical contact. I couldn’t stand some of the men, so it was easier to be high—I then turned to street (continued on reverse)
prostitution to keep up the habit.” In order to cope with past or current sexual violence in their lives, many prostituted women and youth use drugs or alcohol; and those already addicted may be coerced into prostitution by pimps and johns in exchange for drugs. Eventually some may trade sex for drugs on their own to satisfy their addictions.

Criminalization
Many women are incarcerated on prostitution-related charges, including charges for drug possession and usage. Upon release, many of these women do not have a stable place of their own or the support needed to achieve self-sufficiency, and are often prostituted again.

Access to Services for Youth
Currently there is no place a homeless minor can legally access long-term services. Youth on the run can stay at emergency shelters only for a finite period of time. Such a lack of options makes youth more vulnerable to pimps and prostitution.

Community Response
Residents of Chicago’s 14th and 18th districts are currently banding together and marching against women and youth who are being prostituted on the streets. Such action fails to address and eradicate the commodification of women and youth and further victimizes those prostituted.

Breaking the Barriers: Housing
Affordable Housing Development
The definition of who is homeless should be expanded to include those who are trapped in systems of prostitution. Subsequently, an already critical lack of affordable housing seems even more critical, especially when characterized as part of a solution to assist those surviving and fleeing violent and abusive systems or as a preventive measure that decreases vulnerability. Collective advocacy around affordable housing development should also include representation of those who are trapped in systems of prostitution.

Transitional Housing with Services
Women and youth in need should have access to transitional housing programs where they can access services in the form of job training and education, support groups, trauma and abuse counseling, and substance abuse treatment.

Breaking the Barriers: Law Enforcement
Women and youth should not be criminalized for being forced into prostitution. For the women and youth, prostitution should be regarded as a system of violence, not a lifestyle option. The focus of law enforcement should be to increase the arrests of pimps, johns and organized networks that profit from the trafficking of women and youth. The U.S. federal government should convene a task force on prostitution to conduct research on alternatives to incarceration, identify gaps in services and recommend strategies to address criminal elements, trafficking and profiteering.

Breaking the Barriers: Services
Comprehensive Service Mechanism
The Continuum of Care, a planning body in Chicago for homeless services, should be cognizant of the inextricable link between prostitution and homelessness. Advocates should have representation at the continuum level to raise awareness and to press for resources for prostitution-related services. Partnerships should form between homeless shelter service agencies and sexual assault service agencies to provide systematic counseling and intervention services to those entering the shelter system. Members should also collaborate with national and international organizations that are combating the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and youth.

Family Violence Option (FVO)
Illinois should adopt the FVO, which allows for increased flexibility in applying program requirements of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for recipients escaping domestic violence. The FVO should be expanded to those women escaping systems of prostitution.

Youth Programs
Illinois law needs to be changed to allow for the partial emancipation of homeless youth so they can legally access services. Standards should be set for youth programs, and funding should be drastically increased to provide needed services, including prostitution-related services, for homeless youth.

Substance Abuse Treatment
Haymarket Center in Chicago is an exemplary treatment facility that works to thoroughly address addiction issues. Long-term residential and extensive outpatient services, similar to those offered at Haymarket, should be expanded throughout the city with further attention given to abuse and trauma counseling.

Breaking the Barriers: Community Action
Instead of scapegoating women and youth on the streets, residents of communities in Chicago should concentrate their efforts on discouraging clients and pimps, who have physical, emotional and material control over the women and youth being prostituted. The atmosphere created by the presence of prostitution in a given community creates a culture that perpetuates violence towards and the commodification of women that extends beyond those being prostituted to all women and youth in the community. Communities should focus their efforts on deconstructing such a culture by concentrating on pimp and john behavior.

Conclusion
As a society we need to stop glamorizing pimping and cease viewing prostitution as an individual lifestyle choice. Prostitution is a system of violence committed against a woman or youth as a result of a society that condones misogyny and racism. A truly egalitarian society, void of violence and homelessness, cannot be achieved without eradicating the commercial sexual exploitation of women and youth.

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2. Use of the term prostituted reflects the view that prostitution is an act committed against an individual and not a lifestyle choice.
8. A survivor of prostitution, name withheld to respect confidentiality.
9. Use of the term prostituted reflects the view that prostitution is an act committed against an individual and not a lifestyle choice.
22. Based on conversations with Chicago Police Department vice squad officers.