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Shared Hope Report Reaches Flawed Conclusions on Sex Trafficking in Arizona

PHOENIX – A report released by Shared Hope International in collaboration with Arizona State University College of Public Programs presents an inaccurate picture of how child prostitution and sex trafficking crimes are prosecuted in Maricopa County. The study, titled “Demanding Justice,” relies on just 24 criminal cases to incorrectly conclude that buyers of child sex are not effectively being held accountable. In a press release accompanying the release of the study, Shared Hope faults prosecutors for charging buyers of child sex with child prostitution rather than sex trafficking, confusing the intent and application of laws targeting these specific offenses.

“Child prostitution and sex trafficking are serious crimes that deserve an informed discussion in order to craft successful public policy solutions, as the recent Governor’s Task Force on Human Trafficking illustrated,” said Maricopa County Attorney Bill Montgomery. “Unfortunately, this report missed a prime opportunity to provide members of the community with accurate and actionable information to facilitate this discussion,” he added.

Montgomery pointed out the report’s conclusions are based on just 24 cases in Arizona, 17 of which involved undercover sting operations without an actual victim. A link on Shared Hope’s “Demanding Justice” website labeled “The Stats” highlights only four cases in Arizona, one which did not involve a buyer of child sex, and three in which the minor was either 16 or 17 years old or an undercover officer posing as a 17-year-old.

“Arizona’s sex crime statutes, including recent changes to address Human Trafficking that were signed into law earlier this year, are designed to incarcerate dangerous and repeat offenders, especially child predators,” Montgomery noted. “While the deterrent effect of sting operations utilizing undercover officers posing as 17 or 16 year-old minors cannot be overstated, punishments for first-time offenders caught in stings where they cannot actually have sex with a minor must be distinguished from offenders who can and/or do pay for sex with minors,” he added.
The “Demanding Justice” report relies on media accounts and internet stories about the 24 Arizona cases it reviewed instead of using publicly available court documents or contacting the actual agencies involved for a complete record. Furthermore, the report does not specifically identify these cases, precluding an independent analysis of the findings and conclusions.

Montgomery also disputed a quote attributed to one of the report’s authors stating “there are only two county attorneys prosecuting cases” and that police are “overwhelming” prosecutors with cases. “In fact, with more than twenty prosecutors assigned to handle sex crimes in the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office, we have adequate resources to handle the volume of cases submitted for charging review and subsequent prosecution,” Montgomery said.

The same author goes on to state that “[i]t’s almost impossible to have enough manpower to then get the cases through to victim restitution.” This statement is grossly inaccurate, as there are no pending restitution hearings in sex trafficking cases involving buyers of minor victims in Phoenix. Also, restitution is not available in cases involving undercover sting operations, which account for the majority of the cases referenced in the study.

Despite its claim that defendants are not being sentenced to the fullest extent of the law, the report states that Phoenix had the longest average sentence actually served by buyers of sex with children (4.7 years), yet a median actual time to be served of 90 days. The study provides no case citations or supporting data that could be used to determine how these figures were calculated in order to verify their accuracy. Since Arizona is a Truth-in-Sentencing state requiring offenders to serve 85% of a prison sentence, the data makes no sense.

“One statement in the report we can heartily agree with is ‘without good measures, solutions are elusive,’” Montgomery said. “This report provides neither.”

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