

Sex Trade

Durbin swears in Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez before her testimony at a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law hearing. Durbin also chaired the hearing.

Alvarez Tells Senators of Child Prostitutes' Ordeals

Cook County state's attorney says office treats them as victims, not criminals

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Some young Chicagoans are practicing "survival sex" and selling their bodies for food, clothing or a safe place to sleep, Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez told a U.S. Senate hearing Wednesday.

Alvarez, addressing a subcommittee looking into human trafficking, told of a girl who didn't want her pimp to face charges because he bought her a Subway sandwich whenever she wanted one. Another girl had sex for cash to buy food and clothing, unable to rely on her mother, a drug addict.

The state's attorney said her office rarely charges juveniles arrested for prostitution-related offenses, treating them instead as victims who need "support, services and a safe future."

The hearing was called by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., chairman of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law. He estimated that 100,000-plus U.S. children become sex-trafficking victims every year.

For nearly two hours, the subcommittee heard graphic, sometimes gruesome testimony about kids trading sex in the streets — or up and down interstate highways — and becoming addicted to drugs while veering between feelings of love for and fear of their pimps.

One ex-teen prostitute told of being left for dead, her face broken into pieces, after turning a trick at age 16 in New Jersey.

Alvarez said criminal enterprises "have made a fortune" exploiting women and girls in Cook County. One survey of Chicago-area women in the sex trade found that 73 percent got in the business before age 18, she said.

Alvarez described a criminal case in 2008 in LaSalle County, Ill., in which gang members distributed heroin and crack cocaine — illicit substances prepared in Chicago — using 17- and 18-year-old girls who smuggled the drugs in their bodies. Gang leaders were videotaped having sex with the girls, she said.

What astonished some lawmakers was the scant number of beds in shelters to give victims safety and social services. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., put the number at 70 nationwide, though another witness said it was fewer than 50.

According to Alvarez, a residential, long-term care facility known as Annie's House hopes to open by this summer in Oak Park for girls as young as 13 and women up to 25.

Alvarez said in an interview that 42 juvenile cases have been referred to the state's attorney's office for prostitution offenses since 2005 and all but seven were diverted from the courts.

Prosecutors went ahead in one recent case because the parents begged them, fearing their daughter would be dead if she stayed in the streets, she said.

Boys also face the "trauma of commercial sexual exploitation," said Ambassador-at-large Luis CdeBaca, who directs the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

He said boys may be "prostituted at public meetings places such as parks, bus terminals, rail stations, markets, hotels or beaches" and are less likely to be identified by authorities.

Durbin heralded the state of New York for a "safe harbor" law that gives such young victims "services, not sentences." Alvarez said her office was drafting a similar measure to present to the Illinois legislature for consideration.