

# ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

## PROPOSAL

**FROM:** Carol Dankert, Commissioner, Erie County Department of Social Services and the Emerging Leaders Workgroup

**TO:** New York State Office of Child and Family Services

**CC:** Mark Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Erie County Legislature

**SUBJECT:** Erie County's Safe Harbor Plan for Sexually Exploited Children

**DATE:** November 26, 2012

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### **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this proposal is to outline the Erie County Department of Social Service's plan for addressing the needs of sexually exploited children in Erie County utilizing the funds being made available by a grant to OCFS from New York State.

### **STATEMENT OF FACT:**

1. A study conducted in 2006<sup>1</sup> identified the following demographic trends of sexually exploited children (under the age of 18) in Erie County:
  - 77% are female
  - 64% are under the age of 16
  - 47% are white, 32% are African-American
  - 10% are Hispanic
2. Currently, minors under the age of 16 are not arrested and prosecuted as prostitutes in Erie County, but 16 and 17 year olds are<sup>2</sup>.
3. Law enforcement, social service agencies, the justice system, and the public are not adequately aware of the problem of the sexual exploitation of children, or what to do about it<sup>3</sup>.
4. There is a critical need for training on how to identify and best serve children who are victims of sexual exploitation<sup>4</sup>.
5. There is a lack of appropriate services in Erie County that specifically address the needs of sexually exploited children<sup>5</sup>.

### **PROPOSAL:**

ECDSS will be utilizing the OCFS Safe Harbor grant allocation to enlist the assistance of the **International Institute of Buffalo**, a community partner with expertise and existing resources, to carry out the mission of this plan. The International Institute of Buffalo has a well-established Victim Services Department that has been the *primary provider* for victims of human trafficking in Western New York since 2006. The staff of their Victim Services Department can dedicate 100% of their time working with and for victims of human trafficking. For this reason, they are seen as experts in the field.

The Erie County Department of Social Services, along with the International Institute of Buffalo, is proposing the following plan to address the needs of sexually exploited children in Erie County.

## 1. Identification of Communities with the Greatest Number of Sexually Exploited Children

Research shows that 89% of sexually exploited children have had previous involvement with the Child Welfare System<sup>6</sup>. Many have also been engaged in the Juvenile Justice System. Erie County's plan would target children at the point of entry into those systems, and follow them until they reached the age of 18. Buffalo is the major metropolitan area within Erie County, and statistically would have the largest concentration of children involved in both the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice systems.

## 2. Services to be Provided

### a. COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Erie County, in conjunction with the International Institute of Buffalo, will increase public awareness of the problem of sexually exploited children in the following ways:

- posting information on the County's website re: warning signs, numbers to call, and community resources
- the launching of a community awareness event regarding the plight of sexually exploited youth that will focus media attention on this issue. This will be followed by a public awareness campaign involving pamphlets and posters placed in public locations (libraries, town halls, shelters, soup kitchens, social service waiting areas, sexual health centers, and on public transportation).
- the creation and facilitation of a sub-committee of the already existing Western District of New York's Human Trafficking Task Force that will meet quarterly. This sub-committee will consist of representatives from victim services, social services, local youth service providers, and legal/ law enforcement agencies, and will focus on youth sexual exploitation.

These initiatives are capable of being replicated in any community.

### Projected Outcomes:

- increased public awareness of the problem of sexual exploitation of youth
- outreach to potential victims through posters and pamphlets in places where they are likely to see them will result in an increased number of calls to the International Institute's Victim's Services Hotline (211).
- local community services agencies will attend the kickoff event and be energized to "sign on" to collaborative efforts to meet the needs of sexually exploited youth

Justification for funding:

- Awareness is the first step toward identifying and reaching potential victims. This portion of the service plan will deliver the best “bang for the buck” in a community that is not familiar with the often hidden problem of sexual exploitation of youth. This component of the plan will bring the issue to light.

b. **TRAINING and IDENTIFICATION**

The International Institute, in conjunction with the International Organization for Adolescents (IOAF), will facilitate focused training opportunities to both government and community agencies (including health centers, shelters, law enforcement, schools, and other service agencies) on how to identify and assess potential victims of youth sexual exploitation.

Erie County will utilize the assessment tools available to identify victims of sexual exploitation as they become involved in the Child Welfare/ Juvenile Justice systems.

This will meet the needs of sexually exploited youth by creating a knowledgeable service community capable of understanding the challenges faced by this population.

This service is capable of being replicated in any community.

Projected Outcomes:

- improved ability of workers in both government, health care, law enforcement, education, and community social service agencies to identify potential victims of sexual exploitation
- an increase in the number of youth identified as victims of sexual exploitation (currently the number is very small- approximately 10 per year according to a study conducted in 2006<sup>7</sup>.)
- identified victims are linked to appropriate services in a timely fashion

Justification for funding:

- Without training, service staff do not have the knowledge and tools necessary to effectively identify and assist victims of sexual exploitation

c. **HOUSING**

Erie County will capitalize on existing relationships with youth homeless shelters such as Compass House and other longer-term residential housing providers to provide safe, appropriate housing for victims while their situations are being evaluated. If family reunification is indicated, Erie County will facilitate that process with our Child Welfare and Family Preservation staff.

This service can be family-focused, if returning to the family will assist the youth in escaping the exploitive situation that they are in, and provided that the youth’s family life is not a contributing factor to it. This can be replicated in any community that has

appropriate housing resources such as youth shelters and supervised youth residential facilities.

Projected Outcome:

- potential victims of sexual exploitation will have safe, appropriate shelter that protects them from further exploitation

Justification for funding:

- Housing meets the most basic human need for safety. Only when a victim feels safe and protected from further harm will they be able to move forward with obtaining the services they need to improve their situation.

d. **CASE MANAGEMENT**

Case management will involve assessing each child, and linking them to counseling, housing, social services, legal services, health care services, substance abuse treatment, educational and vocational services, and any other service indicated by the child's assessment.

The International Institute of Buffalo, an agency with expertise in youth trafficking, will provide case management services to ensure comprehensive service provision including rights education and safe shelter.

This service can be replicated in any community with a social service agency responsible for welfare of children.

Projected Outcomes:

- improved coordination of services to victims of youth trafficking by utilizing case management services provided by a professional victim services/expert employed by the International Institute of Buffalo

Justification for funding:

- Utilizing a trained specialist in trafficking issues to provide case management that will ensure that victims will receive the most appropriate services for their situation. This trained professional has an existing network of contacts and agreements with all local community stakeholders.

e. **INTERFACE WITH THE LEGAL SYSTEM**

Navigating the complex legal and justice systems can add another layer of stress to the already traumatic lives of victims of sexual exploitation. The advocate at the International Institute will assist youth victims every step of the way as they encounter:

- police and law enforcement
- the Juvenile Justice System
- the District Attorney's Office and other prosecutors
- the court system

The International Institute has a great deal of experience representing victims in this area. Their advocate will ensure that the victim's best interests are represented.

This service can be replicated in any community.

Projected Outcomes:

- the youth will be guided through the legal/ justice systems by an expert, so that the experience will not be a source of additional trauma
- the rights of the exploited youth will be protected while navigating the legal system

Justification for funding:

- The legal and justice systems can be intimidating for anyone, but especially so for exploited youth. They lack the knowledge and the experience to know the best course of action. Having an expert in the field assisting them each step of the way can make the situation less stressful, enabling the youth to make decisions that will improve their own lives, as well as the lives of other potential victims.

In addition to these stated services, the International Institute of Buffalo will work to identify potential service needs of trafficked youth and create a county-wide service delivery chart to identify gaps in services. Outreach will be done to various community organizations in an attempt to fill identified gaps.

### 3. How Services Will Address the Needs of All Sexually Exploited Children

While the majority of sexually exploited children are female, Erie County's plan will not limit services to females. Training, identification, housing, casework, and advocacy will address the specific needs of each child and link them to the services that will best fit those needs. Funds for language interpretation and translation will also be made available, so that equal access is provided to all victims of youth sexual exploitation, regardless of gender, sexual identity or orientation, race, nationality, or English language proficiency.

#### Notes:

1. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 76
2. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 36
3. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 3
4. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 2
5. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 2
6. *New York Prevalence Study of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Final Report (April 18, 2007)*. Westat for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. p. 31
7. *Buffalo/Erie County Assessment: Identification of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims and their Access to Services (July 2008)*. Karen M. Andolina Scott, MSW for Shared Hope International. p. 2