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Story from the Star Tribune below:

A Way Out of Prostitution

By PAT PHEIFER • ppheifer@startribune.com

It's still more than an hour before dawn when Joy Friedman, a Breaking Free staff member, and two volunteers start walking east on E. Lake Street in Minneapolis to do outreach work. There aren't many vehicles on the streets at 5 o'clock on a Sunday morning, so it's pretty easy to spot the men circling the block once, twice, three times or more, trolling for sex for sale. But it's the "janes," not the "johns," whom Friedman and the volunteers seek. To the women and girls, some as young as 14, they offer free condoms, a hygiene packet with soap, deodorant and lotion, and maybe, just maybe, for an opening to tell them they can escape prostitution.

St. Paul-based Breaking Free, one of the few organizations of its kind in the Twin Cities, is struggling financially. In the coming weeks, it will take a hard look at its programs to see which can survive. A permanent housing program that houses three single women and 10 families on St. Paul's East Side is the most likely to change or to close. It is partly supported by a federal grant. "People need to know that women have to have housing to get out of that life," said Vednita Carter, executive director of Breaking Free. "Without it they die. We feel that if a woman has to live with a pimp, she's homeless, or if she has to live with her tricks because she doesn't have anywhere else to be in the winter. Those things are chronic homelessness to us."

Breaking Free, which works with about 400 women a year, gets most of its money from private foundation grants and state and federal funding. But funding has been shrinking as foundations, hit by the recession, reevaluate their priorities. Two years ago, Breaking Free's annual budget was almost \$800,000. This year it's closer to \$500,000. **Carter said it needs about \$1 million to continue to offer all of its services. Paid staff has been cut from five to three; about 25 volunteers take up the slack.**

According to the Department of Justice, the average age at which girls enter prostitution in the United States is 13. Seventy-five to 80 percent of prostituted women were sexually abused before age 18, according to a 2004 study. When girls run from what's happening at home, they often run into the clutches of a pimp. "A pimp would never call himself a pimp," Carter said. "He calls himself a 'boyfriend.'" Eventually that "boyfriend" will ask for a favor. His friends — oftentimes gang associates — give him money. In exchange, he gives them his girl. "Can you imagine how you feel inside, having sex with people you don't want to have sex with?"

Friedman said. "But you love this guy so much that you don't want to lose him, so you'll do it for him. All it takes is one time, and your self-esteem and self-worth go so low to the pits of hell that there's no returning for the majority of our women."

St. Paul police Cmdr. Kathy Wuorinen, who heads the narcotics and vice unit, said officers try to do a couple of undercover prostitution sweeps each week to pick up johns and janes. Arrests have gone up in the past two years from what they were in 2006-07, she said. At that time, police averaged about 100 arrests a year; in 2008-09, it's about 125 per year. She said that with the increased use of the Internet, street prostitution has become "less visible to a degree," but citizen- and officer-generated complaints are pretty steady, about 225 a year. Minneapolis police Lt. Dean Christiansen, head of the Third Precinct's Community Response Team, said his officers work on prostitution-related calls almost daily. Jane sweeps require less manpower, but officers try to do undercover john sweeps as well.

The city of St. Paul posts website photos of people convicted of engaging in prostitution or soliciting a prostituted woman. On the city of Minneapolis' website, it's just the men. Both police departments work with Breaking Free and other agencies to try to help the women. Breaking Free works with women in all venues of prostitution — on the street, off the Internet, in escort services or international women being trafficked for sex work. It offers a 12-week support group and aftercare; life skills classes; 18- to 24-month transitional housing that currently houses seven women, and "john school," a daylong court-ordered seminar in which men convicted of soliciting prostitution hear from survivors, health workers and law enforcers.

Breaking Free measures its success in baby steps. "Success is if we get a phone call, if she comes to group, if she even shows up," Friedman said. "We can't force them to get out, but we let them know that when they're ready, we're here. Even though she's going back to [her pimp] every time she leaves our group, she's looking at him differently now and ... saying this isn't OK, he's lying to me. But she has to figure a way out."

Friedman is one of the success stories. Now 46, she's been out of the life for more than nine years.

"I entered prostitution at the age of 13. I was raped by a pimp and three guys at age 15. I can't blame it on my home life," she said. "I wasn't sexually assaulted by a family member. "If you've been talked down to, told you're going to be nothing but a whore, that kind of stuff sticks with you. For the next 27 years, in one form or another I was caught up in prostitution, from dancing to call services to streetwalking. "I should be clinically insane because of what I endured," she said. "But I'm sitting here talking to you because someone helped me address that issue and made me understand that it wasn't my fault."

On a recent Sunday morning, Friedman led the volunteers on E. Lake Street. "Walk and talk, ladies, walk and talk," she told them, reminding them to be aware of potential dangers lurking in dark corners. "Hey, sista', you need some free condoms," she said as a woman walked by. Another, maybe 20, broke into a grin and held her plastic sack open for a hygiene packet and condoms when she saw Friedman, a familiar face to the women on the street.

After driving down E. Franklin Avenue, Friedman and the volunteers found a woman bawling. "I hate him," she screamed. Then, in the next breath, "It ain't him. It's me. It's my life."

“It’s OK, it’s all right. We’re not here to judge you,” Friedman said. “You can get out.”
A few minutes later and a few blocks away, the woman was seen again, approaching a group of young men.

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