

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PROSTITUTES: A VERY MISUNDERSTOOD

SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATION

Bad Economy Drives Even More Women into Dangerous Profession

The Mary Magdalene Project begins its 30th year of providing some of the most unique services in all of Los Angeles and the southland, and is the only nonprofit agency in Southern California that focuses exclusively on helping women prostitutes and their families out of prostitution. The bad economy is having a desperate and dangerous impact on the families living closest to the edge.

“These are the kids we all failed to protect 10, 20 and 30 years ago.”

Martin McCombs, Ph.D.

Executive Director, The Mary Magdalene Project

“One of the most misunderstood things about the women and their dependent families we serve,” says Dr. Martin McCombs, psychologist and 6-year veteran as Executive Director of MMP, “is that over three-quarters of these women - 85%, were sexually molested as children. We all, as a society, failed to protect these little girls from the predators in their families and around them. While the psychological trauma of childhood rape is well understood by many, very few people have the compassion to understand that’s what is going on for the majority of female street prostitutes.”

MMP focuses most of its attention on the women it believes represents the women of highest need, the street walking prostitutes. Agency records for the past quarter century tells them not only that over 85% of female prostitutes have a history of childhood sexual molestation, 79% have substance abuse and mental health disorders, a very high incidence of homelessness, and nearly 80% have 3 or more children.

Mary Magdalene Project Services and New Drop In Clinic

Until now, MMP has been exclusively a longer-term residential program focusing on food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental needs, psychotherapy for post-traumatic stress, family reunification and job

training to replace prostitution as a source of income. In July of 2009, MMP opens a brand new intervention service modeled after another social service agency. The **MMP Drop In Center** is based upon a very successful program in San Francisco called “SAGE” (Standing Against Global Exploitation), an outreach and drop in clinic begun in 1998 by former prostitute Norma Hoteling reaching out to women still involved in prostitution. Designed to be a harm reduction program for women still involved in prostitution but with interventions to assist them in getting out, its history has been a beacon to other social service providers looking to help women and families out of the desperate and dangerous cycle of prostitution dependence.

“It’s not easy for women to exit prostitution,” says McCombs. “The average starting age is 15, and these women have horrific abusive histories that prompt them to believe this is all they have to offer the world. They are runaway and throwaway youth. Some are pimp-controlled, many have multiple co-occurring disorders, and once you’re in you begin to become caught up in a cycle that includes a lack of education, no job history, and often an inability to function among regular society. The majority of prostitutes have tried to leave multiple times.”

Bad economy drives lower-SES women to prostitution to support families

“We’ve seen a recent spike in requests for help,” says Dr. McCombs. “This bad economy is making even greater numbers of lower socioeconomic status women turn to desperate measures to keep their families alive, and in the meantime the reductions in donor giving and grant sources are creating our own economic desperation for our agency.”

McCombs hopes the agency’s stepping up to increase its community level impact by opening a drop in clinic near the “Sepulveda Stroll” where women solicit customers will prompt more support and attention from donors of all kinds. “These women are a significantly misunderstood special needs population,” says he. “They seem to inspire a lot of rage from communities who think they’re out there because they like it instead of the fact they’re risking everything just to survive.”

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