Minnesota reviews first year of law that provides ‘safe harbor’ to sexually exploited youths

During the first year of a statewide system to help sexually exploited children, 163 youths in Minnesota received services and support. The state’s Safe Harbor program is the result of laws passed in 2011 and 2014. With these measures in place, Minnesota is taking a different view of youths (those under the age of 18) who engage in prostitution — they are seen as victims, rather than as criminals.

Eight Safe Harbor navigators have been established to coordinate regional services for sexually exploited children. These navigators help ensure that these youths are identified, receive trauma-informed services and are housed safely.

The findings on how many children received services under Safe Harbor were part of a comprehensive evaluation of the program. In that study, researchers also recommend expanding the age limit (to help sexually exploited adults), developing more services and providing more housing to victims. In its 2014 analysis of laws to prevent human trafficking (including victim-assistance programs), the Polaris Project rates seven states from the Midwest in the top tier: Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio and Wisconsin.

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