

Dawn's light for ladies of night

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Our plan is to offer a home for women who have been trapped by commercial sexual exploitation and who want to get out.

MARY DEFUSCO,
Attorney, Public Defenders

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ANGELA AND “Stephanie,” two women looking for clients near the Kensington Avenue “strip” one evening last week, admit to working as prostitutes to feed their addictions.

“I need to support my drug habit, so I came out here,” Angela, 21, says as she fidgets uncontrollably on a quiet street lined with rowhouses, while her friend appears distracted, looking for men who’ll give them business for the night.

Angela’s been doing this for three years. Stephanie, 23, almost four.

“We have steady customers who come meet us on the corner,” Angela says, showing her hands into her winter jacket. She’s wearing sneakers and jeans. She’s shaking. “We’ll do something to get money. Then we’ll get drugs.”

Angela and Stephanie — which are not their real names nor their street names — say they don’t like their cycle of prostitution and drugs, but they’re also not ready to quit and get help.

For women who want help, a new program offers hope.



ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ/Daily News

In a bedroom at Dawn’s Place, a soon-to-be-open shelter for prostitutes looking to get out of the life, are board members (from left) Donna Sabella, a mental-health nurse, Sister Terry Shields and Sister Teresita Hinnegan.

Dawn’s Place

The old, three-story house is filled with promise — a sheltering place where sunlight streams through the front windows.

It’s a place where — if it’s successful — women who are prostitutes and want to get out of that lifestyle will live for about a year in a nurturing environment and obtain the help they need — medical, mental health, drug treatment, job training. They’ll gain independence from their pimps. They’ll rebuild their self-esteem.

Dawn’s Place is becoming a reality because of the efforts of a coalition of people with different backgrounds — religious ministry, the law, nursing.

“Our plan is to offer a home for women who have been trapped by commercial sexual exploitation and who want to get out,” says Mary DeFusco, an attorney in the public defender’s office, who is vice president of the board of Dawn’s Place, a nonprofit organization formed to set up the house.

Board members are clear to point out that Dawn’s Place is not a religious effort.

It’s not affiliated with any church. Nor is it an initiative of the public-defender’s office.

The board members joined together because they share a concern for women who have been sexually exploited. They want to help address the underlying behavioral issues that have messed these women up and trapped them in a life of prostitution.

Down the road, says DeFusco, the hope is that the criminal-justice system could offer Dawn’s Place as an alternative for women arrested on prostitution charges. That is, judges could offer the home as an option for treatment.

Now, women usually get fined or sentenced to probation. Sometimes, they’re jailed.

“That doesn’t work,” says Marissa Bluestine, the only other public defender who’s on the board. “It’s a revolving door. It doesn’t address what these women need.”

No program like it in the city

“There’s no such program that exists in Philadelphia that takes into account the

level of abuse, the level of force [the women face], and takes them into recovery,” Bluestine says.

“It’s not just about getting off of drugs, alcohol, how to get away from men,” she says, but about being “what they should have been able to be all along. It’s hope.”

Bluestine, who is the go-to person on the topic of commercially sexually exploited women in the public-defender’s office, came up with the name Dawn’s Place.

Through her research, she learned of a New Jersey woman named Dawn who “was murdered by a john” in the 1990s, she says. Dawn had been forced into prostitution by her male partner.

Her death could have been prevented if there had been a “place where she could have gone” for help, Bluestine says.

The word “dawn” also makes people think of “rebirth and rejuvenation, being able to start over again,” she says.

Dawn’s Place has enough bedrooms to

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house up to nine women. As now envisioned, women 18 years or older who voluntarily enter the program would be expected to live there for about a year. While their children would not be permitted to live in the house, visitation arrangements would be worked out.

Because the board is concerned about the safety of the future residents, it has asked that the location not be disclosed. They hope to have the house up and running this spring.

Board members modeled Dawn's Place on a similar program in Phoenix and on other successful programs like it across the country.

But they will likely face hurdles — funding, the day-to-day realities of running such a program, the women's own emotional problems and whether they are ready or willing to accept help.

Will it work?

Municipal Court President Judge Louis J. Presentza recognizes that many women engaged in prostitution have deeper problems that the court system doesn't now address.

"Unfortunately, they're just repeat offenders," he says of many women arrested on prostitution and related charges. "It's a typical revolving door."

Now, he says, "it's probation, jail, fine, probation, jail, fine. It doesn't address the underlying issues — substance abuse, mental health. They could wind up with medical issues, beaten or killed. It's a scary lifestyle."

Dawn's Place is "an excellent idea," he says, and "hopefully, it can make an impact."

But he also noted some potential obstacles.

"The real question is: Will they [the women] accept it? Will they abide by it? Will they run away? It's a major challenge. Right now, nothing's working."

Deputy District Attorney John Delaney, who oversees the D.A.'s trial division, was cautious about the idea.

"We'll have to see" about the program, he says. "They have to get it up and running and see what kind of track record they establish."

"Would the option be in lieu of probation or jail? That all remains to be seen. Our principal interest is that the women don't reoffend."

"I'm hopeful," he says, "but also waiting to see the proof."

It's not pretty out there

"Angela," who's 5-foot-4 and weighs 90 pounds, is addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. She admits she tried to kill herself. If she doesn't get her fix, "I'd rather hang myself than be sick," she says.

Working as a prostitute, "fortuna



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

Police Officer Annamae Law, of the 26th District, in Kensington — winner of the 2006 George Fencil Award — is concerned for the safety of the prostitutes she has come to know who work in her patrol area.

enough I've never been raped," she says. But she's been robbed and beaten. "There are a lot of a--holes out there," she explains.

Police Officer Annamae Law, of the 26th district, on Girard Avenue near Montgomery Avenue, knows Angela and Stephanie and the other women who work near the "strip" — the area of Kensington Avenue and Front Street that runs underneath or near the El. She cares about them.

"These girls, I'm telling you," Law says during a drive last week. "I know my job is dangerous, but I tell you, their jobs are dangerous. They don't know who they're getting in the car with."

About 90 percent of women in prostitution have been robbed or raped, she says.

Studies have shown that women who work the streets are typically victimized and are not out there because they want to have wanton sex, Bluestine says.

There are "very real mental-health issues these women face," she says. "People don't understand."

Mary Anne Layden, director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Cognitive Therapy, notes that about 60

percent of women who have been prostitutes are likely to be depressed; about 73 percent to 85 percent have been raped in that line of work; and about 87 percent of the women wish to leave prostitution.

Women who go into prostitution typically have been raped as a child or have been homeless, she writes by e-mail.

Sister Teresita Hinnegan, president of the board of Dawn's Place, emphasizes that the treatment will be "very personalized, very individualized, sensitive to their needs."

Hinnegan, a member of the Medical Mission Sisters who previously taught public policy and access to health-care for the poor at Penn's School of Nursing, is also a nurse and midwife.

For a woman to enter the Dawn's Place program, she will have to undergo a one-on-one assessment, says Donna Sabella, board secretary.

If both sides agree that the program is a good match, the woman will be set up for medical care, mental-health treatment, and will be taught parenting and other skills during her stay. For some services, she will go outside the house to receive treatment.

Sabella, a mental-health nurse, is director of Project Phoenix, a program in Chester County that provides support to abused women and girls. She named that program in honor of Catholic Charities' DIGNITY program in Phoenix, Ariz., which she considers to be a model for Dawn's Place.

The yearlong residential DIGNITY House program saw an 86 percent success rate in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2006, says Thomas Egan, regional director for Catholic Charities in Phoenix. That figure represents the number of women who were not rearrested on prostitution charges during the year after they graduated from the program.

What worked?

"Talking to some of the clients, they talked about having a safe place to stay and a specialized program that works on their issues," says Egan. Referring to psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, he notes that once the women have "a roof over their heads and food in their

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stomachs, they can work on their longer-term issues.”

The DIGNITY program receives most of its funding from the city of Phoenix, private sources and grants.

The SAGE Project (Standing Against Global Exploitation) in San Francisco had to close its residential program for teen victims of sexual exploitation because of a lack of funding, says Cathy Lemons, manager of administration.

“It’s very, very expensive to run a residential-care program,” she says. “You have to pay for staffing and you have to triple your staffing because it’s 24 hours. It’s a huge jump in the payroll. I would not recommend a small agency taking this on unless they have strong funding from the city. You will go into debt.

“You need alarms for the house, a security-system setup, all kinds of plans for catastrophes — and catastrophes do happen,” she says.

“You need to deal with when the girls run away. A lot of these girls have been brainwashed by the pimps. And these girls would go back to the pimps to be beaten and starved.”

The SAGE house for teens was run by a subcontractor and received both private and city funds.

Lemons says it took three years to get the house operational. It opened in July 2005 and closed this past July.

Rachel West, spokeswoman for the U.S. Prostitutes Collective, based in San Francisco, expresses some concerns about programs designed to help prostitutes. She says one residential house she visited, SafeHouse in San Francisco, appeared to be judgmental and too rigorous.

Glenda Hope, executive director of SafeHouse, countered West’s criticisms by saying: “We are offering something for women who want to get out of prostitution. We seem to be doing well.”

A place of hope

On a tour of Dawn’s Place last week, an excited DeFusco showed a bedroom where someone had decorated the walls with little sheep, and another bedroom where someone stenciled in a roaming branch with green leaves.

The house had previously been

used by an order of Catholic nuns to provide shelter for prostitutes. Its existence was kept secret.

DeFusco found out about the house last year, then learned that the sisters were about to shut it down. The sisters offered the house to Dawn’s Place for \$1.

Before the Dawn’s Place board can get the house up and running, they need to find volunteers with expertise in carpentry, demolition, electricity and plumbing.

The board has received pro-bono legal help from Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP, and pro-bono assistance from area architects.

Board members are also closely watching the progress of a federal bill — the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2007. If it becomes law, it would mean that the nonprofit could apply for federal grants. ★

For more information about Dawn’s Place, send an e-mail to teresitahinagan@comcast.net. Donations can be made out to “Dawn’s Place” and mailed to: Dawn’s Place, Box 24738, Philadelphia, Pa.