**Local authorities crack down on sex trade in Cheyenne**

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CHEYENNE – The market for paid sex acts here isn’t just during Cheyenne Frontier Days.

As another recent sex trafficking sting conducted by local police shows prostitution is an ongoing issue in Cheyenne, and it appears to have gone unaddressed for decades.

“One of the things we wanted to show during Frontier Days was whether or not it was associated with the Frontier Days traffic or if it was something else,” Laramie County District Attorney Jeremiah Sandburg said recently regarding the city’s first-ever undercover crackdown on prostitution during the “Daddy of ’em All.”

“And at least from that undercover operation (in July), all of the johns were local; most of the girls were local. It was a local problem.”

“We didn’t have anybody that appeared to be coming in associated with Frontier Days,” Sandburg said.

Sandburg said he and another attorney from his office were posted downtown with law enforcement during the July sting, and he came away shocked by what he saw.

He said the undercover agents had “zero problem” having people approach them asking for drugs and sex, and they even saw one man receiving a paid sexual act in his car while undercover agents were maybe 100 feet away trying to accept solicitations.

“We couldn’t believe, right there in the open, during daylight hours, in a very busy intersection, this individual has a paid sex act occurring with him, and we were all just watching – we couldn’t believe it,” Sandburg said.

“It was really an eye-opener to the amount of criminal activity going on just a few blocks from this courthouse on an otherwise bright, sunny evening with a lot of people around.”

Sandburg said most people think of Cheyenne as being a nice, quiet community, and yet openly on the streets of downtown, he and law enforcement we were seeing lots of criminal activity take place.

“It really was a much bigger problem than I think most of us, even though we’re in law enforcement, anticipated it would be,” he said.

Cheyenne Police Chief Brian Kozak said after the Frontier Days stings that more would come, and another one did earlier this month.

“We learned that there is definitely a problem in Cheyenne, and we need to continue targeted enforcement in this area to try to rescue women or adolescents and juveniles (from the sex trade),” the chief said this week. “It will be a regular part of business now.”

Back in July, police arrested 13 people in connection with alleged prostitution: four women and nine men.

The sting earlier this month resulted in 10 arrests: four women and six men. Two of the men were from out of state, but everyone else arrested was more or less local.

The recent sting was conducted Oct. 14-16 as part of the FBI’s 10th annual Operation Cross Country – an international coordinated law enforcement effort to recover underage victims of prostitution and draw the public’s attention to sex trafficking here and around the world.

Kozak said police initially didn’t realize the extent of prostitution in Cheyenne, but that “when you pull up Cheyenne (on sex trade websites), you can just see there is definitely a problem here that we need to address.”

He said he first decided CPD needed to move into this area of enforcement about two years ago after attending a training hosted by the FBI in Cheyenne.

The chief met with gents with the FBI’s Innocence Lost Initiative, as well as an investigator from the Denver Police Department and a sex trafficking victim who’d been rescued by the task force.

“It was just an impactful story, so that was where I made the commitment that we need to do this in Cheyenne,” he said.

Kozak said local hotel operators approached him, concerned about the crime prostitution was bringing into the community, and he also learned from the FBI and Denver law enforcement that with intensified enforcement down there, pimps have been moving their sex workers into other areas along the Front Range with less enforcement.

“I did not want Cheyenne to be one of those areas,” he said.

But before CPD jumped into that kind of enforcement, which carries with it a great deal of liability for the city, “we wanted to make sure we were doing it right,” Kozak said.

Over the past year and a half or so, each detective on the department’s Community Action Team – which is going to lead the department’s efforts in addressing sex trafficking here – has undergone more than 350 hours of training in areas such as commercial exploitation of children, human trafficking, undercover techniques and child forensic interviewing.

Kozak said the department’s victim advocates also have attend nearly 100 hours of training to assist with sex trafficking enforcement efforts.

“Our police officers here in the Cheyenne Police Department have had more training in human trafficking than the FBI agents have had,” he said.

CPD reached out to the FBI for help with the July sting and received assistance in the latest one, but ran it all on its own.

“All of our investigators and our undercover officers were all police officers, not FBI agents,” Kozak said of the latest operation.

The chief said the busts don’t go down like many might see in television shows.

“We don’t do that; it’s kind of relaxed, because we don’t want to place any trauma on the potential victim.”

**Rescuing victims**

While neither of the stings this year uncovered sex trafficking of children or adults, one man was arrested in the July sting and charged with conspiring to sexually exploit a child and soliciting a child with the intent of committing first-degree sexual abuse of a minor.

John A. Cruz Jr., 23, of Cheyenne, initially was not identified by police because he was accused of soliciting sex with a juvenile. His was the only arrest made during the sting that involved proposed sex with a minor.

Court documents filed against Cruz on July 28 accuse him of offering to pay an undercover agent $150 to have sex with a fictitious 12-year-old boy described in an online advertisement as “young and eager.”

He waived his preliminary hearing in Laramie County Circuit Court, pleaded not guilty at his August arraignment in Laramie County District Court and is awaiting trial.

Even though no children have been rescued from sex trafficking in Cheyenne, that doesn’t mean it’s not happening here.

“Definitely you could tell from the traffic online that there is some desire here to have sex with a minor, which is disgusting and definitely something we want to intervene in,” Kozak said.

Less than two hours south of here, the sting in Denver conducted earlier this month in connection with the FBI’s Operation Cross County resulted in nine children rescued.

“I’m sure it’s a matter of time. We will rescue some underage juveniles,” Kozak said.

“I was surprised by the dialog, the texting, the online traffic (here) where there’s a desire to have sex with a minor.”

Sandburg said it’s extremely difficult to get prostitutes to disclose whether they’re involved in sex trafficking, but most are and are just too fearful of their pimps to speak up.

 “We certainly had people (arrested in the July sting) who we suspected were being trafficked, but they just weren’t willing to work with us yet,” he said.

For now, it’s all about building rapport and trying to show women that police aren’t out to throw the book at them.

Generally, the women arrested in the July sting were fined or put on unsupervised probation.

“The goal is to try to find women or men who are being sex trafficked, and it’s hard to do that, with the women, in particular, if you come down hard on them,” Sandburg said.

“Because chances are that we, the system, whether it’s here in Cheyenne or back down in Colorado or up in Casper or wherever it is, are going to run into them again.

“And once you build that rapport with them, they’re more likely to speak with you about what it is that’s going on in their life and open up to you about the fact that they are part of sex trafficking. The first time you have contact with them, it’s rare, and so we’re trying to building this rapport here in Wyoming.”

Sandburg said the image of the “happy hooker,” or someone like the character portrayed by Julie Roberts in “Pretty Woman,” is much rarer now than people might think or realize.

Most times, a woman’s pimp has something they’re holding over the woman’s head, possibly her children, he explained.

“The mother has no idea where her child is, and she is told by the pimp that she has to go do these sex acts for money, and if she doesn’t cooperate, she doesn’t get to see her kid,” Sandburg said. “And they’re very reluctant to come forward because they have this big concern that, you know, something’s going to happen to their child.”

After a while, women might get to a point where they appear to be independent, willing operators – and that’s certainly what they tell police – but there’s likely a pimp somewhere taking his cut, Sandburg said.

“So it’s important for the public to realize that even though she might appear to be the ‘happy hooker,’ as it were, there’s very likely a pimp someplace, and he’s got a lot of control over her,” he said. “And if it’s not a child, usually it is some sort of addiction to drugs that he’s got her hooked on, and she has to continue to do this because he’s the supplier.”

**Increasing awareness**

During Frontier Days, the Zonta Club of Cheyenne posted flyers in restrooms with contact information for the National Human Trafficking Resource Center.

“Human trafficking is modern-day slavery, and it’s happening right here in the United States,” the flyers said. “You can help.”

Misti Fisher with the Zonta Club of Cheyenne said the club’s goal is to raise awareness of sex trafficking so people know where to seek help or report concerns.

“We think it’s great that it is getting more coverage,” she said. “I think it’s sad that it has to happen, but it’s reality, and it does happen here. We live off of two highways.”

Fisher said she’s not convinced the women arrested in Cheyenne’s stings are, in fact, willing operators.

“How do we really know that?” she asked. “We don’t know where they’re coming from, where they’ve been and what they’ve been through. I know that happens, but we don’t really know if that was true. We just don’t know.

“We have so many young girls that may be lost themselves, and they enter in that world maybe not really realizing that that’s what they’re entering,” Fisher continued. “That’s what Zonta is about – empowering women to be strong and not falling into that whole human trafficking world.”

Zonta currently is accepting entries for its third annual art contest to raise awareness of human trafficking in the Laramie County area. The theme of this year’s contest is “Human Trafficking: Can You See It?” Entries are due Dec. 30, and a public reception is planned for Jan. 11, which is Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

“The first year we did that, we had a really hard time with the community to get people to participate in that because it’s such a dark subject, and people don’t want to think that that happens, but it does,” Fisher said. “I think it’s great that more people recognize that it is here.”

Another group trying to raise awareness of human trafficking in Wyoming and around the world is a locally founded nonprofit called Gifts of Grace.

The group has put together a special screening of a documentary at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Carmike Frontier 9 movie theater in Frontier Mall. “The Abolitionists” follows a group of former CIA agents as they rescue children trapped within child sex slavery.

Due to recent sting operations and arrests in Cheyenne, the group feels it’s an important time to host a human trafficking awareness event here.

Founder and CEO Tyler Schwab plans to have a question-and-answer session afterward.

“Wyoming should care about child sex trafficking because it is modern-day slavery, and it is happening closer than you think,” Schwab said. “It is the most vile form of evil to exist in the world today, and as good people, we have a duty to protect the innocence of our children.”

Schwab said, “It is evil to sell a child, and we, as decent citizens, have the obligation to fight for those who can’t fight for themselves. The recent arrests in the area are encouraging to me as we see the laws against slavery are being put into practice, but it should also shock and motivate us that it is happening so near.”

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center can be contacted by phone confidentially, toll-free and 24 hours a day at 888-373-7888; online at [www.TraffickingResourceCenter.org](http://www.traffickingresourcecenter.org/); or by email at NHTRC@polarisproject.org. The hotline takes calls for help, tips, requests for services, inquiries about training and more. Language interpreters are available.

Punishments in local sex trafficking cases

CHEYENNE – Most of the 13 people arrested in July after the Cheyenne Police Department’s first-ever sex trafficking sting during Cheyenne Frontier Days have been sentenced in Laramie County Circuit Court.

According to court records, they are:

* Princess Stevenson of Vancouver, Washington. She was sentenced Sept. 28 to pay a $750 fine for a single count of prostitution.
* Erin Miller of Cheyenne. She was sentenced Aug. 18 to spend 60 days in jail for a single count of prostitution, but that jail time was suspended in favor of six months of unsupervised probation. She also was ordered to pay a $750 fine.
* Tasha Grip of Greeley, Colorado. She was sentenced Aug. 31 to spend 90 days in jail for misdemeanor methamphetamine possession, with credit for already serving 36 of those days and 54 days suspended in favor of one year of unsupervised probation.
- She also was ordered to pay a $190 fine in connection with the drug charge.
- For a single count of prostitution, she was sentenced to 36 days in jail and given credit for time already served. No fine was imposed.
* James Cox of Cheyenne. He was sentenced Oct. 19 to spend 61 days in jail for a single count of soliciting prostitution, with credit for spending one day in jail and 60 days suspended in favor of six months of unsupervised probation. He also was ordered to pay a $750 fine.
* Justin Johnson of Cheyenne. He was sentenced Aug. 11 to spend 60 days in jail for two counts of soliciting prostitution and given credit for spending one day in jail, while 59 days were suspended in favor of six months of unsupervised probation. He also was ordered to pay $940 in fines.
- Court records indicate Johnson was arrested Oct. 19 for probation violation in connection with alleged marijuana possession. A scheduling conference for the probation revocation is set for December.
* Ricky McCrary of Cheyenne. He pleaded guilty Wednesday to two counts of soliciting prostitution and was sentenced to 90 days of imposed jail time.
* Julio Reyes of Cheyenne. He was sentenced July 28 to spend 60 days in jail for two counts of soliciting prostitution, with credit for serving 16 days and 44 days suspended in favor of six months of unsupervised probation. His file is unclear as to why he was given credit for spending 16 days in jail when his arrest happened the day before.
- For a count of misdemeanor marijuana possession, Reyes was sentenced to one year of probation with the same underlying jail term as the prostitution counts. He also was ordered to pay a $750 fine.

Some arrested in the sting still are awaiting the outcome of their cases. They are:

* Angela Martinez of Carlsbad, New Mexico. She has a warrant out for her arrest for failing to appear at her initial court hearing for a single count of prostitution.
* William Scott of Cheyenne. He is scheduled for a change-of-plea hearing Wednesday for a single count of soliciting prostitution.
* Kevin Tanner of Cheyenne. He is scheduled for a change-of-plea hearing Nov. 14 for a single count of soliciting prostitution.
* William Eigenman of Cheyenne. He has a scheduling conference hearing set for Nov. 14 for a single count of soliciting prostitution.
* James Zlomke of Cheyenne. He has a pre-trial conference hearing scheduled for Dec. 19 and a Jan. 9 trial date set.
- Zlomke is the science teacher at Cheyenne’s East High who was arrested in the sting. He faces a single count of soliciting prostitution.
* John Cruz of Cheyenne. He was charged with conspiring to sexually exploit a child and soliciting a child with the intent of committing first-degree sexual abuse of a minor and is awaiting trial in Laramie County District Court after entering a not guilty plea at his arraignment hearing in August.

Only one person arrested in the sting this month has been sentenced.

Kyler Macy appeared in circuit court last Monday and pleaded guilty to a single count of soliciting prostitution. He received 60 days in jail, with credit for one day and 59 days suspended in favor of six months of unsupervised probation, and was ordered to pay a $750 fine.

The cases of everyone else arrested in the recent sting are at varying stages in the judicial process.

Caitlin Shelby and Leighanna Hanson, both of Cheyenne, have arraignments scheduled for November for a count each of prostitution.

Jodi Nelson of Cheyenne had a court appearance Wednesday for a single count of prostitution; and Bernadette Lopez of Loveland, Colorado, has had her case bound over to district court because she faces a count of felony sale/delivery of methamphetamine, in addition to counts of prostitution and marijuana possession.

Four of the men arrested have arraignment hearings scheduled for next month for a count each of soliciting prostitution. They are: Juan Pucastro, Thomas Sauber, Thomas Watkins and William Tilson.

Additionally, Jonathan Archuleta has a scheduling conference set for late next month as well.