



An Overview of San Diego's John School Program: The Prostitution Impact Panel

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Overview

The Prostitution Impact Panel program was developed in 2000-2001, and held its first classes in 2002. Program designers observed San Francisco's john school (the First Offender Prostitution Program) and used it as a model, but altered it substantially to meet local needs and resources. The sessions are held every two months (occasionally, one of the six planned classes in a year will be skipped if reverse stings have not produced enough potential participants). Through the end of 2009, 800 people had successfully completed the program, for an average of roughly 100 per year.

Arrested sex buyers are charged with violating California Penal code 647.b (a small number of offenders are charged with the similar charge of 653.22, loitering with intent to engage in prostitution) offered the option of this program. Successfully fulfilling its requirement results in a reduced charge (and not a dismissal, as in diversion programs). Requirements include paying a fee of \$200, attending the Prostitution Impact Panel class (for which they earn a certificate), and completing mandatory HIV/AIDS counseling. The charge is then reduced to a lesser offense. Offenders must pay a fine (which is in addition to the PIP fee). The charge also allows for a maximum of 90 days in jail (as opposed to 180 days for the original charge), but men who complete the program rarely receive jail time. The primary penalty of concern to the offenders is that the conviction stays on their criminal record.

Class observation

Project staff observed one session of the PIP program, on December 14, 2009. In addition to observing the class, site visit activities included interviewing program staff at the City Attorney's Office and collecting program documents. In the PIP session observed, there were 12 johns present, four of whom were using headphones for Spanish translation.

Presenters

- **PIP Program Coordinator**, from the Neighborhood Prosecution Unit of the San Diego City Attorney's Office.
- One **Program Facilitator** (a conflict negotiation expert for private businesses who also teaches in academic settings).
- Two **residents** of the community.
- One **former sex buyer** and acknowledged sex addict.
- One **police officer** who presented (a second officer helped set up and monitor the class).
- Two **women who were formerly involved in prostitution**.
- One **mental health specialist**.
- Two workers from the **San Diego County health department**.
- One **interpreter** (Spanish).

Class Agenda

Agendas for the PIP classes are not distributed to participants. The agenda presented below was assembled from information gathered during our observation of one PIP class, and through interviews with program staff about the topics normally covered in the program.

Registration begins at 5:45, and the class starts at 6:00 PM. There is a 10 minute break at about 7:00, and the class ends at 9:00. The class evaluation forms are distributed right after the class ends, and take about 5 minutes to complete. The separate presentations are divided into the following six substantive topics, preceded by an introduction to the program and establishment of ground rules and requirements for successful participation:

- Introduction – ground rules and overview
- Impact on the community**
- Impact on survivors**
- Risk of crime victimization**
- Drug and alcohol addictions**
- Sexual addiction, impact on johns**
- Health risks and consequences**

Descriptions of the substantive content of the program, based on an observation of one class and interview discussions of class modalities, are presented below.

Introduction (presented by the PIP Coordinator and the Facilitator)

The prosecutor who serves as the PIP Coordinator opens the evening with a brief overview of the agenda for the class and the goals of the program. She stresses that the speakers will not discuss the legality or what anyone did that led to their arrest, but rather, will explain the impact that sex-buyer behavior has on the community (and possible personal ramifications as well). She then presents the ground rules for the program, stressing that anybody found sleeping or texting, or being disruptive, will be asked to leave without receiving their certificate (but they will get their money back). The prosecutor then introduces the moderator/facilitator.

The facilitator reiterates much of what the prosecutor says in terms of the goals of the evening: to educate sex buyers about the negative ramifications of their behavior, and to provide the community with a voice. He presents three ground rules: (1) listen, (2) don't verbally respond to anything (unless asked to, and the program provides a 3 x 5 card for questions), and (3) pay attention.

A brief (less than 5 minutes) video is shown in which a 16 year old girl explains why she was glad she was no longer engaged in prostitution and why prostitution has many negative consequences. She explains that she started when she was 12 and was arrested by 14.

Community impact (presented by several representatives from the community)

People who live and/or work in the community discuss the negative impact of prostitution. For example, in the class observed, an elderly Latino woman and a middle aged Caucasian woman represented the community. The older woman explained how she had been a resident in that community for 30 years and raised several children there. She noted that she had a lot of community pride and liked living there, despite the reputation for crime and associated problems. She explained how troublesome it is to find

condoms and needles in the street near her house and to have to worry about her grandchildren seeing/touching those. She stressed that prostitution was responsible for bringing in ‘a criminal element’ and making the community unsafe for her and her family and other residents. The moderator asked her to explain how/why prostitution leads to other crimes and the resident reiterated that ‘it brings a criminal element.’

The second speaker noted that she had lived in the community for 22 years and was currently raising children there. She explained that she doesn’t have a car and therefore uses public transportation on El Cajon Ave (the main strip on which street prostitution takes place in San Diego). While walking to or waiting for the bus she has been asked if ‘she’s working’. She explained how shocking and degrading that’s been for her. She said it even happened once while she was with her seven year old daughter. She repeatedly emphasized how awful it is to be mistaken for a prostitute. That was the emphasis of her comments, but like the woman who preceded her, she noted City Heights to be a family community, even though it may not seem like it, and that residents don’t want to raise their children around prostitution, drugs, and crime.

The two women spoke for about 15 minutes total. Upon completion, the facilitator asked if any of the johns had questions for them. One of the johns said: “I didn’t realize there was much of a community in that area, so I want to say I’m sorry. It’ll never happen again.”

Impact on Survivors and Others (presented by women formerly serving in prostitution)

The first woman who had formerly engaged in prostitution to speak to the PIP attendees was a fairly young woman (perhaps in her thirties). She explained that she had been “caught up in that lifestyle” for many years and that she had a serious drug addiction throughout her years as a prostitute. She noted that most of the other prostitutes are addicted too and that some of them are ‘crazy’. She admitted that she too could be ‘crazy’ when on drugs, saying that if there’s a drugged out prostitute who’s having a bad day, ‘look out—cuz anything can happen...a trick could get stabbed, robbed, or even worse...’ She explained that a lot of the prostituted women and girls she knew when she was working were mentally ill and on drugs and could be really dangerous. She further explained that the pimps sometimes beat up and/or robbed the johns as well and that the whole scene is a lot more dangerous than johns might realize. She said it took her many years to get out because she became reliant on the money to feed her drug habit and that it was ‘easy money’ compared to anything else she might do. She is currently working with young girls who are involved in prostitution and she said that a lot of the prostitutes working in the area are very young. She emphasized again that these girls are somebody’s daughter, and are probably caught up in drugs and in way over their head.

The second woman who had been involved in prostitution was middle-aged, and now runs a program for prostitution-involved girls in juvenile hall. She explained that she had been married and had a son but that drug addiction led to the loss of both and the entrée into prostitution. Like the first woman, this one noted the dangers of prostitution for johns—that they could be beaten, robbed, even killed. She further noted that gangs are now involved in the prostitution business (as pimps), making it even more dangerous than it already was. She made many of the same points as the other woman, stressing that the girls and young women involved in prostitution are doing it because they’re typically drug addicted and desperate and that engaging in prostitution only worsens their addiction and problems. She urged the johns to understand that the prostitutes are people’s sisters and daughters—‘would you want your sister out there doing that...would you want someone paying your sister to do that?’

Risk of Crime Victimization (presented by a detective from the San Diego PD vice unit)

A vice unit detective explains that he goes out every night to participate in sting operations where he solicits a prostitute, so he knows the risks sex buyers face. He stressed repeatedly how dangerous it is out there (on El Cajon Blvd, in particular) for johns, and that both prostituted women and their pimps can be very violent. Among the dangers described were prostituted women delivering johns to pimps to be robbed and/or assaulted.

Drug and Alcohol Addiction (presented by a social service provider)

A social service provider speaks briefly about their work as a mental health counselor who specializes in drugs/alcohol and also compulsive disorders. While not assuming that all the men are compulsive or driven by addictions to drug and alcohol, such addictions can be involved and if so, the men should seek help. A variety of handouts from service providers are left at the back of the room for the sex buyers to take later if they so choose.

Sexual Addiction, Impact on Johns (presented by a sex addict and former sex buyer)

The PIP session features a presentation by a man who self-discloses as a sex addict and a former sex buyer. In the class observed, the presenter chronicled his life as a sex addict and explained how powerless he was to his addiction until he finally entered into a 12-step program. He noted that he wasn't there representing Sexaholics Anonymous but that he was a member, and that information (flyers) were available in the back of the room for the PIP participants to pick up later. He spoke in detail about his obsessive sexual behavior that had controlled his life—prostitution, pornography, masturbation, etc. He noted how he could spend several days (without breaks) viewing internet pornography and that he was not able to maintain any limits on his sexual behavior. Every time he said to himself, “well, I'd NEVER do that,” he would end up doing it. He asserted that “our society” and the media make it impossible for a sex addict to avoid sexually charged materials—that “we are all constantly inundated with them and that it's easy to become obsessed.” He explained that after several failed marriages and relationships (due to his sex addiction), he finally decided to seek help in order to maintain a relationship with the woman who later became his wife (who accompanied him as an audience member in the PIP session observed). He noted how liberating it was to be able to live without sex outside of his relationship, and that he had so much more time and energy now that his mind and body were freed from that addiction.

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES SPEAKERS

Speakers from the local health department provide a relatively long (40+ minutes) PowerPoint presentation on sexually transmitted diseases. Detailed information was provided about the symptoms and treatment options available (or not available) for a host of infectious diseases. Graphic photos are presented to illustrate STD symptoms.