



## OFFICE OF THE SAINT LOUIS COUNTY ATTORNEY

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### NEWS RELEASE

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

### **Battle against sexual exploitation/trafficking of children continues**

The St. Louis County Attorney's Office continued its leadership in combating the sex trafficking of children by sending Assistant County Attorney Vicky Wanta to the "Summit to Undo Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Minnesota."

Participants at the Summit began the planning phase of implementing the new Safe Harbor legislation, including establishing six "Regional Navigators" across Minnesota. "The role of the navigators will be to coordinate our collective response when victims of trafficking come forward," said St. Louis County Attorney Mark Rubin. The Program for Aid to Victims of Sexual Assault (PAVSA) will be the regional navigator for Northeastern Minnesota, he said.

Safe Harbor creates a system of response called "No Wrong Door" to identify child victims of sexual exploitation and move them towards recovery and healing while holding traffickers and purchasers of children responsible for their actions.

Safe Harbor also provides shelter and services for the state's sexually exploited youth with a goal of ending child trafficking.

"Trafficking is not always as dramatized as movies make it out to be," Wanta said. "It can also happen on a much more informal basis under the ruse of luring runaways into partying and eventually getting them to prostitute themselves for extra cash. ... At the conference, I heard stories about trafficked victims being in court for other crimes like thefts. There was one case that was brought up where the girl was stealing stuff because she owed her pimp money."

Wanta plans to share the information she learned at the conference by talking to colleagues and defense attorneys to help them recognize the signs of children being forced into crime while being trafficked for sex.

Wanta and prosecutors from around the state, as well as social workers and other advocates for children were told that Minnesota children are sold for sex every day in towns and cities, at truck stops and motels, in cabins, apartments and houses.

The exploited children will receive added protection starting Aug.1 when Minnesota's Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Youth Law goes into effect. The law is designed to ensure that juveniles who are sexually exploited or at risk of exploitation are treated as victims.

Before adjourning last week, state legislators increased funding to the Department of Health and Department of Human Services for housing and supportive services for youth who are sexually exploited.

The St. Louis County Attorney's Office will be working with the Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force to help develop a statewide model protocol for identifying and intervening with sexually exploited and trafficked youth.

The Minnesota Safe Harbor Kickoff Conference was presented by the Association of Minnesota Counties and held at the Arrowhead Resort and Conference Center in Alexandria.