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## **Human trafficking court to serve Capital Region**

Schenectady County specialty court may served other counties

SCHENECTADY -- Preliminary discussions are underway about creating a human trafficking division in Schenectady City Court, the state Office of Court Administration has confirmed.

Officials met with Schenectady County District Attorney Robert Carney last week about potentially developing the section into a regional specialty court.

New York has 11 courts that specialize in labor and sex trafficking, but none serving the Capital Region.

Prostitution arrests are complicated by immigration issues, violence, addiction and mental health problems. Human trafficking courts focus on victims' needs and seek to resolve cases without criminal charges, Carney said.

"Very few of them do this sort of thing because this is what they want to do and have no other pathologies in their life," Carney said. "The vast majority get into this to feed their habits and they are exploited by the people who promote prostitution."

The Capital Region's tourism industry and proximity to large cities make it appealing to traffickers and there have been a number of arrests in recent years. Schenectady sees a high volume of prostitution activity around Rivers Casino and Resort, and during summer months, traffickers from out of state come to Saratoga for racetrack season, prosecutors say.

In Albany County, some Colonie hotels also make a convenient pit stop for sex traffickers who are passing through.

Advocacy groups, such as the Capital Region Women's Bar Association, have expressed a need for a local court dealing with the issue, according to OCA spokesman Lucian Chalfen.

"It can be helpful in all parties, the judge, prosecution and defense bar along with advocacy groups, being familiar with the law, issues and services," Chalfen said.

Since the Capital Region straddles two sprawling judicial districts, there will be further discussions about coordination between the counties in those areas.

The state in 2007 passed its first comprehensive human trafficking law, cracking down on the individuals who force young women and children into prostitution and creating screening system to identify and help victims.

A decade later, relatively few trafficking arrests are made outside New York City, and many prosecutors continue to focus resources on arresting prostitutes rather than pimps and sex ring leaders.

Some lawmakers have sponsored legislation moving the state towards decriminalization of prostitution. At the Capitol on Tuesday, sex workers and former trafficking victims rallied for the measures to end the state's loitering for prostitution law - which they say has caused them to be profiled and harassed by law enforcement - and the expungement of criminal records for those forced into the business.

Prosecutors' treatment of prostitution is often shaped by the communities they represent and having a regional court could create a consistency of outcomes, according to Albany County District Attorney David Soares.

"We are amazing people at planning to eradicate problems, we are not social workers or experts at addiction or trauma," Soares said. "The specialty courts do bring that expertise to the table. I would love to defer the more complicated decisions to them."

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