

Sex trade claims runaways from troubled facilities

Residential centers' staff look the other way as youths leave for street corners, pimps

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The central Illinois truck stop was chilly and dark on the November morning last year when Mary Bohanan was arrested for prostitution.

Handcuffed in a Bloomington police squad car, the 19-year-old squirmed in her tight miniskirt and crumpled knee-high boots. Blond-tinted curls fell around her face and dark liner rimmed her tired eyes. It was just after 5 a.m.

As police frisked her pimp, she expressed fear that he might spot her through the squad car window and punish her for getting caught. "I'm scared. ... He can see us?" Bohanan asked the arresting officer, according to the police video of the scene.

The young woman offered to truckers for \$20 was a juvenile ward of the state who endured a history of abuse before being placed in 2012 at Rock River Academy in Rockford, where officials pledge to keep youths safe and give them a shot at a better life.

Instead she fell into a world of sexual exploitation that seems to be accepted as a fact of life at some of the large residential treatment centers that get millions of taxpayer dollars each year to care for Illinois' most destitute and troubled young wards, a Tribune investigation found.

The prostitution emerges against a backdrop of violence at the facilities where the threat of sexual coercion is common, residents frequently square off in fights, destroy property, abuse medications and attack peers or staff, government records show.

Teenagers who were prostituted told the Tribune they would run away to escape the turbulence and brutality — then do what survival required on streets where they had no money or life skills. At the facilities, experienced residents introduced others to pimps, escort websites and street corners. Some disappeared into this world and never returned.

Rock River promises close supervision and intensive therapy to youths with behavioral and mental health problems, but state records show that Bohanan was repeatedly attacked by tougher girls — punched in the face, hit with a chair and taunted by a peer who poured a carton of milk on her bed.

"The kids do what they want, and the staff can't control them," Bohanan told the Tribune. "To me, it's like a game to survive. There's fighting, there's sexual acts going on with the peers. ... Girls come out worse and have more mental problems."

Bohanan started running away to the streets, according to Department of Children and Family Services records.

Some Rock River staff were aware that Bohanan was being prostituted when she left the 59-bed facility. In one 2012 incident, Rockford police brought her back with



GARY MARX/CHICAGO TRIBUNE
TRYING TO SURVIVE: After running from Rock River, Mary Bohanan said she was forced to have sex with men.

a large bruise that she said came from a beating by a local pimp, government records show.

Another Rock River runaway, age 15, was admitted to a Chicago hospital after she was sexually assaulted at gunpoint by a man who was preparing to prostitute her from a South Side motel, according to Rockford police reports and DCFS records.

“It was this guy who said he would take me to get a tattoo, but he took me to a hotel room,” the girl told the Tribune. “He made me put on whore’s clothes. I got raped.”

In a close look at two residential centers — Rock River and Lawrence Hall Youth Services in Chicago — the Tribune identified 14 youths since 2011 whose engagement in prostitution while on brief runs from the facilities was confirmed through police, court or child welfare records. In addition to the youths identified in government records, former residents and staff described cases of prostitution by some 20 other facility residents. The Tribune cross-checked these accounts through multiple interviews.

The newspaper also used records and interviews to reveal sex trafficking at several other government-funded facilities that house hundreds of state wards.

If young sex trafficking victims are picked up by police, a DCFS policy guideline says residential facilities should immediately alert state child welfare officials and offer counseling and practical assistance. But at Rock River and other facilities, Tribune interviews with former residents and staff revealed, some staff members openly mocked these youths, sometimes calling them whores.

“When the staff would find out about things like that, some of them would start hitting on the girls and some of them would start calling them names like whore and slut,” said former Rock River resident Dallas Donati, 18. Experts say that response can destroy an already-distressed youth’s sense of self-worth.

DCFS acting Director Bobbie Gregg said she was shocked to hear reports that facility staff had ridiculed residents who engaged in sex trafficking. “I’m outraged that any of the staff who work with our youth would have that kind of callous and irresponsible attitude. ... It’s not acceptable,” she said. “We do not consider them prostitutes. They are victims.”

Gregg said the Tribune findings highlight an inherent problem with residential facilities. “One of the reasons not to have troubled youth in congregate care is because of the influence they can have on each other. That’s another reason why my preference would be ... a family home setting,” Gregg said.

Gregg said she was not aware of any specific pattern of prostitution at the state’s residential centers. But DCFS officials separately acknowledged that only a fraction of the prostitution cases among state wards are identified by authorities.

The agency and Illinois law enforcement have taken initial steps to raise aware-



ANTHONY SOUFFLE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

‘I WOULD WELCOME THEM WITH OPEN ARMS’: Darren Edmondson is serving a six-year sentence for crimes that include pimping Mary Bohanan. “I learned that, being traumatized the way they were, they were open to anybody and subject to anything,” he said.

ness and improve reporting “so we can get a more accurate indication of how extensive of a problem is it,” Gregg said.

DCFS has held training sessions for hundreds of caseworkers and facility staff, and in May began placing posters in shelters and residential centers that show a notorious Chicago pimp with the words, “This is not your ‘Daddy’ ... You are not for sale.”

Karen Johnson, a senior vice president and compliance officer for Rock River’s owner, the multibillion-dollar Universal Health Services Inc., said she objected to any suggestion that there was a pattern of prostitution among Rock River girls or that a lack of care helped promote such behavior.

“It’s important to also understand that in many cases ... these patients come in with long histories of abuse and trauma, including even being prostituted by their family members or their foster families or their guardians,” Johnson said. “Many come with this as part of their picture, requiring the care that we, I believe, very carefully and thoughtfully provide to these troubled kids.”

Johnson declined to discuss any specific residents.

Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart has hired and trained three former sex workers to counsel youths picked up on the streets and assigned a team of deputies to find those who are missing. But Dart expressed frustration at the number of youths who walk out the “revolving front doors” of residential centers and into the arms of sex traffickers.

“Can’t we protect them better?” he asked. “The state is supposed to be taking the place of the parents. What parent would sit there, looking at her daughter, and say: ‘Nothing I can do — she’s 16 and she wants to just leave at 2 in the morning. Nothing I can do — she’s been doing it for a month now. Nothing I can do — she’s hanging out with pimps’?”

“Nobody would do that. But yet we cling to this broken model.”

‘Why they run’

In downstate Robinson Correctional Center, Darren Edmondson is serving a six-year sentence for crimes that include pimping Bohanan. Police records state that he offered her to men at the Bloomington truck stop by lifting her shirt to expose her bare chest.

She was the only Rock River resident he prostituted, he told the Tribune, but he said runaways from similar Illinois residential facilities had worked for him.

With histories of abandonment, abuse and exploitation, he said, many of these girls had come to feel on some level that they deserved harsh treatment.

“I learned that, being traumatized the way they were, they were open to anybody and subject to anything,” said Edmondson, 28, who acknowledged pimping since he was a teenager.

“All they needed was a little attention. ... Whoever watches over these group homes, if they paid a little more attention to the girls’ feelings and not just the rules, I think (the girls) would feel a little more comfortable in there. I know for a fact that is why they run. ... I would welcome them with open arms.”

Asked to describe Bohanan, Edmondson said: “She is easily persuaded. She is real green — fresh, young-minded.”

Adopted from Lebanon as an infant, Bohanan had learning and psychological disabilities and suffered abuse as a young girl, according to juvenile court records and her own account. She was raped at age 9 by a 12-year-old boy when they were on a special-education school field trip, records show.

Like some children who have experienced abuse, Bohanan went on to be accused of abusing younger schoolmates and peers. She also began running from her adopted home.



ANTHONY SOUFFLE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ABUSE SURVIVOR: Jason “Keyona” Laws had already engaged in prostitution before entering Lawrence Hall. But she hoped the facility would offer a haven. Instead, Laws told the Tribune, she felt safer on the streets. Looking back, she said: “I was out on the streets doing things I should not have been doing, especially being a DCFS ward.”

By the time she was 17, Bohanan experienced at least 11 psychiatric hospitalizations and was picked up by police more than 24 times, mostly for running away but also for allegedly stealing a cellphone and for possessing cocaine, records show.

“She has allegedly been prostituting,” said a DCFS report from October 2011, when Bohanan was 17.

Placed at Rock River in May 2012, Bohanan was quickly embroiled in the fist-fights that characterize daily life there.

She began fleeing the facility, and in one of the runaway reports examined by the Tribune, staff waited 16 hours to notify police. In that July 2012 incident, a Rock River administrator called police and said Bohanan had run away the night before. The administrator said she wasn’t sure where Bohanan was “but believes she would go to the west side of Rockford where she can make money,” according to a police report.

That night, Bohanan made local TV news when she was swept up in a Rockford police prostitution sting along with seven other women.

By that point in the evening, she had engaged in six or seven acts of prostitution, she later told police. Bohanan said she did not use condoms because she did not have any. She said she was given marijuana to smoke as well as “a white rock that was gooey inside” and also alcohol.

“Mary reports that she is scared of her pimp because he knows she is placed in Rock River,” said a DCFS report to juvenile court from that incident. She was worried he could easily track her down.

Court documents show that Bohanan sought to remain in detention rather than return to Rock River. But youths in Illinois cannot be charged with prostitution, and she was sent back to the facility.

There, Bohanan engaged in sex with younger residents, according to facility reports — although she told the Tribune the incidents were consensual. Bohanan’s DCFS caseworker repeatedly tried to get her placed in a more secure and therapeutic facility.

“Mary has made no treatment progress since coming into care” at Rock River, her DCFS child welfare specialist wrote in one 2012 report to a McLean County

juvenile court.

But according to a juvenile court report, DCFS supervisors and Rock River staff argued that she should stay, “as they believe she will run away no matter where she is placed and there was not a clinical justification to move her.”

Bohanan’s mother, Antoinette Bohanan, recalled begging juvenile court and DCFS officials to put Mary somewhere she would be safe and secure and get meaningful therapy.

“Why did they just keep sticking her back at Rock River Academy?” Antoinette Bohanan asked. “One time she told me that she took three other girls with her on the run. I called Rock River corporate and said, ‘Now she is taking younger girls with her — when is this going to stop?’ ”

‘Staff knew’

Far from the cornfields and country roads surrounding Rock River, similar patterns of escape and sex trafficking emerged as the Tribune tracked down runaways and examined police records.

One young woman described to reporters how she was prostituted at age 15 on the streets of Chicago after she was sent to the 10-bed all-female ERIC Family Services residential group home on the West Side.

“It was easy,” that teenager told the Tribune. “You see other people doing it; why not get out there and do it yourself?” At the facility, she added: “You turn into a whole different person.”

That former ERIC resident told Tribune reporters she could make hundreds of dollars a night from 10 or more customers on nearby streets. But she kept little of the money because she soon came under the control of a West Side pimp. “Once you get a pimp, you had to do what you was told,” she said. “It was frightening. You get traded, and now you’re looking at this other pimp.”

ERIC, which is paid about \$900,000 a year by government agencies, had the state’s highest runaway rate among residential facilities and group homes last year, with 16 percent of the girls AWOL on an average day, internal DCFS data show.

Former ERIC resident Tierra Tolentino, 20, said some staff were aware that residents were involved in prostitution from talking to the girls who returned with cash in hand. “They knew,” she said.

In March, ERIC staff noted in a report to DCFS that a 16-year-old girl who left the facility in the evening had “yelled out that she was headed out to make her some money.”

The Tribune made repeated attempts to get comment from ERIC officials but received no response.

Interviews with prostituted teens show they were driven by deeply complex motives. Many described how desperate they were to escape the violence of their institutions. Once on the run, with no one to turn to for even a hot meal, some believed the sex trade was their only way to survive.

At the same time, others spoke with pride about buying status-symbol jewelry and tattoos with the money they earned. Several said their pimps provided stability, protection and love — even as those adults took their pay, meted out beatings and



ANTHONY SOUFFLE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

SAD HISTORIES: After examining nine cases of prostituted youths cited by the Tribune, Lawrence Hall Executive Vice President Julie Youngquist said about half came to the facility with histories of prostitution, and almost all had been sexually victimized.

sent them back to work.

With family histories of drug abuse and sex trafficking — and tragic personal stories of sexual victimization — many said they were living the only life they knew.

Jason “Keyona” Laws had already engaged in prostitution before entering a 48-bed residential center run by Lawrence Hall Youth Services in the Ravenswood neighborhood. But Laws, who was 16 when she arrived there in 2011, hoped the facility would offer a haven and a new start.

Laws was housed on a wing of the facility set aside for gay, bisexual and transgender youth, offering “a safe, non-judgmental space to express themselves,” according to Lawrence Hall’s website.

Instead, Laws said, she was taunted by two boys within days of arriving. A facility worker tried to stop the fight that broke out, but one of the boys knocked Laws down and stepped on her face, DCFS reports show.

Soon she was leaving the facility with other transgender or bisexual youth who would dress in short skirts and head out as a group many nights to sell their bodies for cash.

“We used to go out in below-zero weather to prostitute in the winter,” Laws told the Tribune. “Staff knew what we were doing. We used to talk about it.”

In September 2012, a Lawrence Hall worker was driving a van five blocks east of the facility when he saw a 15-year-old resident soliciting passers-by with offers of sex. According to a facility report to DCFS, the employee asked what that youth was doing. The resident responded: “Girl making my money.”

In another report a month later, a 16-year-old boy left Lawrence Hall wearing red and black leggings, a trim leather jacket and a cat-ears headband as he announced to a peer “that he is going to the same spot they were at yesterday and make some more money.”

The Tribune used police, court and DCFS records to identify at least nine Lawrence Hall youths who engaged in prostitution while living at the facility.

“Some of the younger ones started prostituting at Lawrence Hall,” said Laws, now 19.

In a letter to the Tribune from the Pinckneyville Correctional Center, former Lawrence Hall resident Larry “Lala” Hartison wrote that she will be forever grateful for the facility’s support as she achieved her identity as a woman.

But Hartison, who is in prison for stealing cars, also acknowledged being among a group that engaged in sex trafficking there.

“Nobody was forced into nothing; what I will call it was peer pressure,” Hartison wrote. “Every kid went AWOL all the time, and of course kids went together when they did so.”

Hartison was “pushed by an older resident to go and to make a quick buck.”

“That always happens,” Hartison added. “And where do most of them end up? On Belmont, selling sex for money.”

Laws ran for good after a couple of months at Lawrence Hall, saying she felt safer on the streets. Looking back, she added: “I was out on the streets doing things I should not have been doing, especially being a DCFS ward. I feel like something needs to be done, so that this doesn’t happen to other kids.”

After examining the nine cases cited by the Tribune, Lawrence Hall Executive Vice President Julie Youngquist noted that about half of those youths came to the facility with histories of prostitution, and almost all had been sexually victimized. Youngquist said facility records from the last two years revealed no similar pattern of prostitution.

Kevin Pleasant, who headed Lawrence Hall’s LGBT program before leaving this year, said it was widely known that groups of residents — some as young as 13 —

were prostituting themselves, and there was little the facility could do about it.

“You can’t stop them,” Pleasant said. “The reality is you can’t monitor them in the street because you are not there. ... It hurt.”

In the wake of the Tribune’s reporting on residential centers in recent days, DCFS last week placed Lawrence Hall and ERIC Family Services on intake hold — meaning no new wards will be sent there. “We have taken swift action to address any issues that could impact the safety of those in our care,” the agency said.

Missing, exploited

At Rock River, some former staff also said they were aware that girls were regularly leaving to engage in prostitution.

In 2012, a 14-year-old Rock River resident named Claire was briefly detained in a high-prostitution area of Rockford standing alongside a registered sex offender and a parolee, police records show. She told police she was staying with a woman named Yolanda — a pattern and name familiar to at least one Rock River employee.

A Rock River nurse contacted by police said she had “heard through different girls in the facility” that Yolanda took in runaway girls. Yolanda, according to the nurse’s account, “gave them a place to stay ... in return she would prostitute them.”

In Tribune interviews, two former Rock River residents recalled a separate incident involving Claire: As staff drove a group of residents back to the facility after an outing at a roller rink, they passed the girl walking the streets.

“The kids seen her in high heels and a dress. We go, ‘Oh my God! That’s Claire,’ ” said Izabela Stanislawczyk, 18, a former Rock River resident. “Staff said, ‘What the f--- is she wearing?’ They didn’t do anything.”

Claire has been missing since June, and in September the nonprofit Truckers Against Trafficking asked truckers to keep an eye out for the teen, posting an Internet profile with her photo and name and describing her as “at high risk for trafficking.”

“These are kids who have no resources,” said Kendis Paris, the organization’s executive director. “They don’t know where their next meal is coming from.”

At the now-closed Larkin Center in Elgin, juvenile court records describe a 13-year-old girl who was prostituted by “an older male in his twenties” during her frequent runs from the facility.

During one run in 2011, staff followed for a short distance, admonished her that a police report would be made, and then left her. She was found a day later, beaten.

When she ran again a few months later, police picked her up in Rockford. Back at Larkin, she asked staff to examine her, saying she had sex with two men “to have a place to stay.” On another run, she reported that she had been gang raped.

Larkin’s former executive director, Dennis Graf, said staff did everything in their power to keep the residents from eloping and worked with police to help find them, knowing they faced dire realities on the street. “These young girls are not treated well. This isn’t a ‘Pretty Woman’ type scenario,” he said.

Some former residents of Indian Oaks Academy in Manteno, about 50 miles southwest of Chicago, told the Tribune that when they ran away they prostituted themselves so they would never have to go back to the bleak environment of the facility.

One 17-year-old who ran away last year described Indian Oaks as “the worst place anybody could be in.” She said she begged for money for a train ticket to Chicago and, once there, initially sold candy bars on the street to support herself.

A few weeks later, she ran into another former resident who was prostituting. “I used to say I’m never going to do that,” the 17-year-old said. But, she said, “selling candy bars wasn’t making any money.”

The girl soon joined “the ward squad,” a group of former Indian Oaks residents who say they prostitute in the Roseland neighborhood.

Ward squad veterans gave her advice on everything from street survival to how much to charge johns, said another member, Kierra Scurry, 17, who said she no longer works as a prostitute.

“When you here, how you finna make money? You can’t get a job. You on run. You either sell drugs or sell your body,” Scurry said. “The streets make you turn a different way.”

Indian Oaks Executive Director Mike Chavers said facility staff work closely with the youths who enter the program with histories of prostitution. When they run, he said, staff members follow and engage with the youths in hopes of bringing them back. But once they have disappeared, staff cannot control what they do next.

Another former Indian Oaks resident, who is 16, said in an interview from Chicago that she endured repeated attacks as she prostituted herself to pay for clothes, food, hygiene products and her cellphone service.

“I’ve been raped so many times,” she said. “The struggle is real.”

Played and sold

Mary Bohanan’s journey to the Bloomington truck stop began in late October 2013, when two Rock River staffers drove her to Chicago for a psychiatric exam so she could qualify for disability benefits.

When no one was watching, she slipped through a hospital back door and down a stairwell, according to government records and interviews.

Bohanan told Bloomington police that she initially sought shelter from an 18-year-old Facebook friend named Jeremiah, records show. But instead, she said, “Jeremiah plays me and sells me.”

Turned over to pimp Edmondson, Bohanan said she was kept in a Bloomington apartment and forced to have sex with more than a dozen men who gave Edmondson cash and drugs in return.

“He had me doing this all the three days I was gone,” Bohanan told police. “I didn’t want to.”

At one point, Bohanan tried to flee with a woman named Holly. But Edmondson slapped Holly to the ground and grabbed Bohanan’s arm and hair to drag her back, Bohanan told police.

“He said, ‘Bitch, I own you!’ ” Bohanan told police. “So then I got to working. Because I got scared.”

Now 20, Bohanan was recently living in a threadbare Rockford public housing apartment with a man she met at a Rockford bus station — someone she said she truly cares for.

“I can take a lot of pain, but I also hide the pain,” Bohanan said. “It’s weird. ... I feel like I’m strong because I have not yet been mean to other people.”



ANTHONY SOUFFLE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

‘THE WARD SQUAD’: Kierra Scurry, a former resident of Indian Oaks Academy, with her boyfriend’s son. She said she was part of a group of former residents who prostituted themselves in the Roseland neighborhood and shared advice — from street survival to how much to charge johns.