



Safe Harbor at last

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It took much too long, but the Legislature has finally approved legislation to help children who are pressed into the sex trade to turn their lives around. The legislation, known as the Safe Harbor Act, has been sent to Gov. Paterson's desk. He should sign it immediately.

Last year, amid great fanfare, the Legislature passed, and former Gov. Spitzer signed, one of the toughest anti-trafficking laws in the nation. It is designed to protect young people, mostly women, who are often lured to this country with promises of good-paying jobs in many fields, only to find themselves forced to work in brothels and massage parlors, or as sweatshop laborers.

In theory, federal law prohibits human trafficking, but in practice, federal agencies do not have the personnel necessary to crack down on any but the largest operations. Thus, as long as there was no tough state law in place, many smaller operators were free to ply their trade throughout New York, with no fear of being shut down.

Last year's law changed all that. But as welcome as it was, it was far from complete. The law did not address the plight of underage boys and girls who are born in the U.S. and wind up on the streets, often after fleeing their homes because of family troubles or abuse. Many come from New York homes, while others gravitate to the lure of New York City and other urban centers, where they are easy prey for brutal pimps who force them to work as prostitutes.

Incredibly, these youngsters -- some no older than 12 -- often faced arrest and prosecution if they were caught selling themselves, even though state law provides that any adult who has consensual sex with a minor is liable to prosecution for statutory rape. Sheer logic argued for turning things around, so that the adults, not the children, were treated as guilty parties.

Indeed, the state's highest tribunal, the Court of Appeals, had pointed out this double standard and urged the Legislature to end it. The Safe Harbor Act does just that, by calling on authorities to treat child prostitutes as victims of exploitation rather than as criminals. The bill also calls for the state to provide these young victims with housing and counseling so they could begin a new life.

Last year, some lawmakers objected to these provisions, largely out of concern over the cost of providing support services. Some prosecutors were also wary of the bill, on the grounds that the threat of jail was necessary to persuade the young victims to testify against their pimps.

These objections were never a good reason to block passage of the Safe Harbor Act, and now, thankfully, they have been resolved. The next move is up to Mr. Paterson. Sign the bill, Governor, and save the children.

THE ISSUE: A bill to protect exploited children is before the governor.

THE STAKES: The sooner it is signed, the sooner shattered lives can be repaired.