

Newsday

Sign the Safe Harbor law

Gov shouldn't pinch pennies when it comes to kids coerced into prostitution

July 7, 2008

How should we treat sexually exploited teens? Like criminals or like victims?

The answer is obvious when children are shipped across national borders and dragooned into work as sex slaves. Or when they're molested by a pedophile. Law enforcement treats those teens as the tragic victims they are. So why not when a teen is coerced by a pimp into selling sex? Unfortunately, the law allows those teens - who are too young even to consent to sex legally - to be dumped into the justice system and treated like criminals.

"Safe Harbor" legislation, sponsored by Assembly member William Scarborough (D-St. Albans) and passed by the legislature, would end that injustice. It would change the practice of arresting, prosecuting and incarcerating children under the age of 18 for prostitution, and require that authorities instead place them under state supervision and provide services, such as shelter, crisis intervention and help toward a better life. Gov. David Paterson should sign it into law.

Paterson hasn't said he won't sign the bill - but he hasn't said he will, either. The problem appears to be money. The Safe Harbor law would require some spending to set up short-term safe houses and to make provisions for more permanent housing for teen prostitutes whose family situations make going home impossible. Officials peg the cost, beginning in 2010, at up to \$10 million a year, but it could be considerably less if existing facilities are adapted to this new use.

With the economy limping along with no real relief in sight, Paterson has good reason to be tight-fisted with the public's money. But the effort to rescue children from a life of exploitation and degradation is not the place to cut corners.