Some people say prostitution is a victimless crime and a career choice for the women involved. But many of these girls may have entered the industry as minors, having already been sexually assaulted, exposed to domestic violence and incest, says Daria Mueller of the Prostitution Alternatives Round Table, started by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) in 2001.

“Individuals that are prostituted and involved in the sex trade are some of the most stigmatized, marginalized group of individuals and the fact of the matter is so many of them are coming from so much abuse from their childhood, from their teen years,” said Mueller, who is associate director of state affairs at CCH.

“A lot of individuals in the sex trade are doing it out of survival, because they need a place to stay, they need food to eat, they need clothes on their back,” Mueller added. “They need to feed their children, or they’ve come out of jail or prison... maybe they were already involved previously and that’s all they have to come back to because now they have a criminal record.”

One Chicago study showed that, on average, women entered the sex trade at the age of 16. Most did so out of desperation to obtain shelter or food for themselves or their children, or possibly to escape a dysfunctional home, according to prepared material from the End Demand Illinois Campaign. On any given day in Chicago, there are more than 16,000 women and girls involved in the sex trade.

Often, their childhoods were filled with trauma that led to substance abuse and mental health issues. “Their rate of PTSD is higher than combat veterans,” Mueller said regarding women in the sex trade.

When they wind up in jail they need supportive services to change their lives so they avoid returning to prison.

Women trying to leave the sex trade or who are exiting the prison system often have no home to seek refuge. “Homelessness is a huge issue for this population and we’re trying to solve that problem so that no one needs to be forced to engage in survival sex.”
Mueller said. Other supportive services needed for the chance at a better life include trauma informed counseling, mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, job training and placement, prostitution anonymous groups, and supportive housing, Mueller said.

But Mueller believes these women can thrive if given opportunities to escape the exploitative cycle. “It’s been about creating alternative options for women in the sex trade so they can prevent getting involved in the first place, or in exiting, so that no one has to feel like they have no other choice.”

In 2008, Mueller and Cook County Chief Criminal Court Judge Paul Biebel hatched the idea for an alternative court for women in the sex trade. “We called it the WINGS Project, for Women in Need of Gender Specific Services,” Mueller said.

This court pulls together elements from the State’s Attorney’s office, public defender, probation, judges, TASC (Treatment Alternatives for Strong Communities, which advocates for people in the court system who need substance abuse treatment), the sheriff’s department and social service providers.

The WINGS Project strives to prevent recidivism for women in the sex trade and tries to address the issues that brought them into the court room in the first place. Since the court began early this year, 25 women have been enrolled. They receive two years probation, with the first 120 days focused on inpatient alcohol and drug treatment.

Community-based service providers contribute job training and counseling free of charge. Affiliated partners include: Career Advancement Network; Heartland Alliance’s Violence Recovery Services; Rape Victim Advocates; Mujeres Latinas en Accion; Access Community Health Network’s Women Returning Home program; and substance abuse treatment providers such as Haymarket and Cornell Interventions.

“We can spend a lot less money than we would incarcerating them and clogging up our court system and dealing with the consequences of that whole system not working and sending people back into the street with the same problem they came in with,” Mueller said.

“I think that we can be really successful with this project because we have such a good collaboration of governmental and non-profits involved,” Mueller said. She sees WINGS as a model project for other states.

Besides the 25 women enrolled in WINGS, the court continues to find specialized treatment for ongoing referrals (65 at present), although not on the same scale. Services still include counseling, mentorship and supportive groups, similar to 12-step programs.

The women also receive GED, job training and life skills training. Career counseling and private housing are ultimately the end piece.

Chicago activists have worked for years to bring laws giving further relief to victims of sex trafficking. In 2006 the Predator Accountability Act allowed prostituted victims to sue any individual responsible for recruiting or maintaining them in the sex trade or who profited from the sale of their body. According to Mueller the act, “created a new precedent for a class of individuals who are most often treated as criminals and not seen as victims and who don’t otherwise have any precedent for suing someone who caused them harm because their activity was seen as criminal.”

The End Demand Campaign continues to lobby for such legislation so that penalties deter the purchase of sex. The campaign is a network of like-minded organizations seeking to refocus law enforcement’s attention to pimps, johns and traffickers while proposing a network of services for survivors of the sex trade.

The coalition is led by the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) and includes partners from Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and Cook County Sheriff’s Women’s Justice Programs, DePaul University College of Law’s Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family Law Center, Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Polaris Project, and The Voices and Faces Project. Both Mueller and Lynne Johnson of CAASE emphasized the campaign’s prioritization of survivor voices in all legislative advocacy.

Thanks to End Demand’s work, the Illinois Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act will go into effect next month. Individuals with prostitution charges will be able to petition a judge to overturn prostitution convictions if they can prove they were a
victims of sex trafficking under either Illinois or federal law.

In addition, an sex trafficking victim could also prove he or she was a minor at the time of entry into the sex trade, according to Lynne Johnson, policy and advocacy director of CAASE.

CAASE’s Sexual Assault Justice Project is prepared to help survivors use this law. “We’re really excited because we’re going to file on behalf of survivors... and help them clear their records so that they can go on and continue to be productive members of society,” Johnson said.

Criminal justice focus on suppressing demand took off this August when the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office and the Cook County Sheriff’s Office pursued a sting operation that resulted in the arrest of 10 traffickers and 27 customers, or johns.

“We have had a trafficking crime in Illinois since 2006 and we never had any investigations or convictions until State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez obtained the first convictions about six months ago so we really as a state have not been enforcing these laws at all,” Johnson said.

Misconceptions often shift when law enforcement works to suppress demand. “They’re learning more about the abuse that the prostituted people experience... they’re beginning to see those people as potential crime victims worthy of support,” said Johnson.

Law enforcement’s success in this sting is largely due to the use of wire tapping, made permissible by The Illinois Safe Children Act. An initiative of End Demand and Cook County State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez, the Safe Children Act was signed into law August 2010. In addition, arrested perpetrators face a $1,000 fee, half of which is directed towards survivor rehabilitation services. (The average yearly take for a Chicago pimp is $150,000 to $500,000, according to a 2010 study by researchers Brenda Myers-Powell and Jody Raphael through Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center and DePaul University College of Law.)

Social media and online messaging boards show that End Demand has had an impact, Johnson said. “They comment about places and events where they’re being held accountable. We’re being paid attention to...johns are very responsive to criminal justice attention.”

Grassroots advocates also work tirelessly to end the injustice. Pastor Trudie Strickland, co-pastor at New Testament Baptist Church in Marquette Park, raises consciousness on the ground in Marquette Park.

Strickland and her church members are concerned their community is at risk for exploitation and collaborate to raise awareness.

Church members and their friends went around the neighborhood on the Illinois Rescue and Restore Campaign’s annual Outreach Day
last April 23, to place flyers that would tell potential victims about protective services. Flyers went up in windows of nail salons, laundromats, clothing stores, and convenience stores.

One enthusiastic blogger from the website www.funnybear.com also wrote flyers were later put up in Forest Park and Chinatown.

This summer, the church used a more discreet way of spreading information. Members inserted prostitution hotline numbers into lipstick containers, which they placed in clothing donation bags distributed to the most vulnerable members of the community.

Although Marquette Park may be a hot spot, the trade is not restricted to certain neighborhood boundaries. Strickland shared, “Any neighborhood has prostitution, it’s anywhere, but some of the key factors are low-income neighborhoods, neighborhoods with immigrants, or neighborhoods near industrial parks and airports. If you have one of those components you might want to start looking a little deeper.”

While street prostitution is more visible in particular areas it accounts for 10 to 20 percent of the sex trade, according to Mueller. “The sex trade is spread out all over, all over the city, all over the suburbs, the rural areas, all over Illinois, all over the country, all over the world. It’s happening everywhere, in River North, in the Gold Coast,” says Mueller. The majority of prostitution occurs behind closed doors, she explained, in venues such as drug houses, hotels, brothels, massage parlors, escort services, and strip clubs.

Activism in ending this form of modern day slavery cannot be limited to faith communities or non-profit organizations. It will take immense public support to terminate a $6 billion industry and ensure no woman’s body can be a commodity sold by pimps for purchase.

General public and political support is imperative to make commercial sexual exploitation history. Political support across the board is vital. “We need to create the political will to ensure that our government at the local, state, federal levels is ensuring that those that are most vulnerable are able to receive the services that they need,” says Mueller.

Johnson points to the Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Deterrence and Victim Support Act now before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. The legislation would generate nationwide grant funds for specialized services directed towards trafficked children. It’s been stalled on Capitol Hill because of the budget crisis, Johnson says, and needs public support and prioritization in Congress to successfully pass.

Strickland suggests that starting education on the issue in middle school would help suppress demand and prevent child exploitation. Her suggestion makes sense when you consider 62 percent of young females in the sex trade entered before age 16. Strickland hopes new role models can work to change mindsets on the sex trade at a young age.

“It won’t end until people stop buying, it’s like no consumer, no product and we have to get it through to the young men that real men do not buy sex,” Strickland said. “It has nothing to do with your economic levels and nothing to do with culture...it’s the norm and we have to put the message out there that it’s not cool to buy sex.”

CAASE’s Johnson has similar views. “I think that if the community believes that prostitution is an occupation, would you be comfortable with a pimp coming to your kid’s school career day?”

“Now, of course nobody would because we don’t want our daughters to be subjected to prostitution,” Johnson said. “This is not work, it’s physically and emotionally damaging to the people involved.”

“[The act] created a new precedent for a class of individuals who are most often treated as criminals and not seen as victims.”

- Daria Mueller, Prostitution Alternatives Round Table